

Eastern Christianity: Development across the two millennia

By Bishop Maroun Lahham of Tunisia

On the 8th of September 2005, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI appointed Monsignor Maroun Lahham, a faculty member at Bethlehem University and Rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jala, as the Bishop of Tunisia.

This is the full article on Eastern Christianity translated from Arabic. It is an attempt to explain the differences between Eastern and Western theology in hopes of removing any misunderstandings or misjudgments between the two. This article, available in its entirety here, was printed in Cornerstone in two parts: Part 1 in Issue 17, Part 2 in Issue 19.

Ex Oriente Lux

Light sprouts from the East. Thus was said and thus it occurred. The light of monotheistic faith spread across the corners of the earth. Eastern Christianity has remained loyal to the essence of the message bestowed upon it by providence although the path was often uneasy. In this article I will address issues related to Eastern Christianity:

1. The underlying political and religious conditions
2. The theological dimension of the history of the Eastern Church
 - a. A Mystery After the Model of the Trinity
 - b. Combining the Unity of Faith and Diversity of Traditions
3. Prospects for the Future.

I. Political and Religious Conditions

Connecting the political and religious dimensions is a result of what happened on the ground. Through various phases in the development of Eastern Christianity, political conditions have affected religious attitudes and vice versa. The two aspects are largely inseparable.

The Church was established in Jerusalem at Pentecost AD 29 following Saint Peter's Spirit-inspired preaching when thousands, both Jew and Gentile, came to faith. With time, there were more Christians from Gentile backgrounds than Jewish which necessitated the Jerusalem Council in AD 50. Gradually the Eastern Church began acquiring a universal character electing Mark, a non-Jew, as the Bishop of Jerusalem.

Pax Romana allowed the Church to spread easily, especially after the edict of Milano in AD 313, when Christianity was adopted as state religion. Dogmatic discussion persisted. On the one hand, there was a need to mould the Christian faith with the prevailing Hellenistic thought, including devising theological expressions comprehensible by the intellectuals of the day. On the other hand, the diversity of cultures, languages, rituals and traditions resulted in deep disagreements. Successive ecumenical councils were held seeking to find a common theological language on issues related to creed. Consequently, deep divisions tore the family apart and left indelible traces on the Eastern Churches. The controversy included matters related to the essence of faith, such as the Incarnation and Divinity of Christ. Divisions were not

always dogmatic but were philosophical, cultural, political, and social as well.

With the spread of Arab rule, the profound political and religious influences affecting the Eastern Churches continued. The Eastern Churches coexisted with Islam. The churches experienced the tolerance of the Omayyads, the severity of the Abbasids, cruelty of the Fatimids, domination of the Crusaders, corruption of the Mamluks, and the oppression of the Turks. The Church survived all and did not disappear. "The Eastern Church did not have the sense of triumphalist Christendom that emerged at the end of the first millennium in Byzantium and Western Europe. The Eastern Churches had to live in humility and sometimes undergo humiliation. They did not know the glory or delusions of Rome, or the second Rome (Constantinople), or the third Rome (Moscow)."

The current era has not been less painful to the Eastern Churches. Successive wars since the beginning of this century have dispersed people to various Arab countries and the Diaspora. Furthermore, the West focused on recruiting Eastern Christians into new churches. Experience has shown that this was not the ideal way to serve the Eastern church nor did it contribute to the unity between East and West.

To summarize thus far:

1. The Eastern Church has suffered in a way that no other church has;
2. The Eastern Churches have had to adapt to many changes imposed upon them throughout their history. This fact has to be considered before passing any judgement on them;
3. In spite of "the services" offered to the Eastern Church over the years, it continued its journey through its own dynamic power and the efforts of its people. By doing so it

remained faithful to what was handed down by the Apostles.

II. The Theological Dimension in the History of the Eastern Churches

The God of history has a purpose for the life of the Eastern Churches. Discovering this purpose, understanding it, living by it, must be the goal, not only for the Eastern churches, but for the Church universal.

The first thing to be aware of regarding the Eastern Churches is their emphasis on the centrality of Christ. They comprise a portion of the people of God under the authority of a bishop who through the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the light of the word of God, is the successor of the Apostles. It is the Church incarnate in the "here and now," the one, holy, catholic Church throughout the world.

The East has its own way of expressing the reality of the Church and its own pattern of understanding it and living it. While the Christian Church is one and the same at all times and places, it is distinguished in the East as being a mystery after the model of the Trinity, one that combines unity of faith with diversity.

a. A Mystery After the Model of the Trinity

The visible features of the Church, whether canonical, existential, or organizational are all important, but have to be closely linked to the Church and reveal its mystery. The divine dimension has to take precedence and must be revealed through what is seen or sensed.

The Church is a mystery. It is that amazing, divine providence "that was kept secret for long ages" (Romans 16:25) and which God revealed to us "when the fullness of time had come" (Galations 4:4) "in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6) "to gather up all things in

him..." (Ephesians 1:10). This means that the Church was created by God and constitutes a community of people gathered together first and foremost by the grace of God, "who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God," (John 1:13).

This mystery has two dimensions, divine and human. It starts and ends with God and is directed to human beings. It thus creates communion between God and human beings. This concept of *Koinonia* is fundamental when it comes to understanding the nature of the Church, the way it was understood in the East for centuries. The Eastern Church lived the mystery of this communion by focusing on the unity which is based on the one faith and the same sacraments. It is a unity symbolized by the office and presence of the bishop, through the liturgy and understanding that the Church is a mystery rather than a human institution. This communion flows from a living theology that changes human beings into a renewed and transformed people, called by God, existing through God, and walking in God's holy way. God is holy and has gathered his people in a way that surpasses human understanding. The Church is a gift which proceeds from the unity of the one and undivided Trinity and offers us a model to live by.

In the theology of the Eastern Church, the Holy Spirit holds a special place because through the power of the Holy Spirit the Church became the body of Christ after Pentecost. The birth of the Church is the same as the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, a mystery. It came to be through the power of God and not by human willpower.

The fact that the Church is created in the image of the Trinity, according to the theology of the Eastern Church, has implications on the life of the believing community who are the backbone of the Church. If every person of the Trinity is in essence "directed towards the other," which

means a gift to the other in absolute divine transparency, then every human being is created "in the image of God." This means that the *raison d'etre* of every person is to love and be loved in the likeness of the Godhead.

b. Combining the Unity of Faith and Diversity of Traditions

Ever since the light of faith shone on the East, it realized that the mystery of the one God is beyond expression through one language, one culture, or one ritual. It is possibly beyond any human expression. The Eastern Church was able through long and difficult experience, in spite of some failures along the way, to combine unity of faith with diversity of ritual, as well as theological, spiritual, and canonical tradition. The Eastern Church has tried to maintain a delicate balance between unity and diversity. It realized that "unity without diversity is despotic, while diversity without unity is chaotic."

The Eastern Churches were able to maintain their unity through remaining true to their faith, the living and common apostolic traditions handed down by the Apostles. This includes the sacraments of faith and in particular the sacrament of apostolic succession and the fellowship in love especially among bishops who represent, in a mystical way, the twelve disciples. The real measure of truth and unity in the various traditions of the Eastern Church lies in the degree of participation in the one and only apostolic tradition. This is the meaning of the word "catholic" in the theology of the Eastern Churches. According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, who turned the word "catholic" into a Christian term, it literally means: "according to all, or through the participation of all." This means that the "all" is in every part, just as the soul is in every part of the living body.

Unity is guaranteed by the sacrament of apostolic succession. The tradition handed down by the Apostles does not view the local churches mechanically but rather saw in every church a creative dynamic. In Western thinking, the Church, i.e.: "the catholic church," is incarnated in the "here and now" of the local churches. The latter are in turn created "in the image of the one catholic church." In contrast, Eastern thought gives priority to the local church which has all the elements of the "catholic" church because it is both apostolic and catholic, in other words, the whole is embodied in the part. The "catholic" Church is essentially the body of the local churches. The body is held together by one faith, based on one apostolic tradition. That is why churches with diverse traditions recognize each other. Each sees in the other the mystery of the one Church while retaining its own legitimate particularities, provided that the Church stay within the communion of faith and love with the other local churches.

Historically speaking, it was not easy to maintain this delicate balance between the unity of faith and the diversity of ritual, spiritual, and canonical traditions. This is evident in the many divisions and local feuds that exist until this day. The unity of faith was deeply shaken following the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 when disagreements surfaced over the two distinct natures of Christ. Quite often, what was legitimate diversity of ritual turned into closure, monopoly, ignorance of the other and competition alien to the spirit of the Gospel. Furthermore, churches began to proselytize each others faithful and to lure them in every way.

Most Eastern Churches took on the character of "national churches" and focused on the legitimate autonomy of the local church. Soon, this autonomy came to be associated with a specific country and people. Along with that, each church distanced itself from other local churches with whom it shared a common faith. These difficult conditions

lasted for centuries and marked the Eastern Church with a special character of paranoia, closure, suffering and a search for identity.

One of the temptations that the Eastern Churches fell into, because of their strong attachment to the "sanctity" of tradition, is their belief that the Christian faith and tradition give the believer a human nature and a culture which is different from that of the non-baptized. In fact the mother Church is an indigenous church constituted of all the people it ministers to. It does not create a Christian society as opposed to another non-Christian society on the grounds that the two do not share the same faith. The importance of the Christian Church is that it is the yeast of God's kingdom working from within our social and cultural reality. Our ancestors comprehended this fact as evidenced in the great amount of heritage they handed down. It all reflects the incarnation of faith in more than one language, civilization and culture that successively prevailed in the East. This is something that later generations failed to fully understand.

Another challenge which the Eastern Church failed to meet is the need to connect faith with changing reality of everyday life. They did not develop a social outlook or vision based on the Gospel. It assumed that holding onto tradition meant resisting change. As a result, faith failed to influence changing social conditions.

One important explanation of this is the fact that Church tradition has two sources, divine and human. On the one hand it is a gift of grace, while on the other hand it is a fruit of the endeavors of our ancestors in faith. It is also a product of history. As a product of human endeavor it involves dangers which our ancestors attributed to "the spirit of the world." This means the denominational spirit and the literal practice of liturgical ritual and pride in its beauty, while "their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6). It also meant forsaking God's commandments and holding onto tradition (Mark 7:7-8).

Undoubtedly, this caused deep scars that left their imprint on the heart of the Eastern Church. It did not disappear, but suffered and bled because of its internal divisions. It was weakened by the "Dhimmi" system, by Turkish hegemony, by its own liturgy and by simple daily religious practices that failed to express themselves on a cultural level. Furthermore, during the last century, Protestant and Catholic missionary work operated within a mentality that did not take ecumenism into consideration. As a result, fear prevailed within the Eastern Churches and caused it to become closed and isolated which in turn brought forward what it feared most: deterioration, emigration and extinction.

Prospects for the Future

"And the gates of Hell shall not prevail..."
(Matthew 16:18)

No matter how much the Eastern Church has suffered or was torn apart, it believes without doubt that its founder is alive and that He is the source of her life. Because Jesus is living and because the Church has its life in Him, by Him, and for Him, it must stay alive, open and receptive in order to be light, salt and yeast. The price that the church has to pay for this is summarized in the words of Patriarch Ignatius IV in an address at the Catholic Institute in Paris. He said: "In order to open up to the future we need to break the circuit of fear. The Church is the bride of the spirit and the spirit is fire. Fire is not something to play with. We either extinguish it or throw ourselves right into it thus setting the whole church alight, together with all humanity and the whole universe."

The Church has to be open in two directions: within the Eastern Churches and without. This means first putting its own house in order and then entering with courage and strength into the ecumenical movement.

Putting its own house in order

It is difficult to understand why the Eastern Churches took so long to realize that the main reason behind their dogmatic differences is not theological but rather cultural and linguistic. The bonds of love between those churches have long ceased to exist; as a result suspicion replaced trust for long centuries. It is noticed that with every schism inside the Eastern Churches as well as the big schism with the West, there has been a loosening in the bond of love, which has separated many churches, and which inevitably justified itself as dogmatic differences. This separation later established itself in a legal structure.

The Eastern Churches must unite around the "sacrament of the bishop." This idea is a rich theological concept within the theology of the Eastern Church. It is believed that the bond of love is a realization of the charisma related to the episcopacy. Nowadays, we find that the pastoral efforts of the Eastern Churches though substantial are fruitless, because they are scattered and un-united. The churches are called upon to repent and turn away from competition and scattered efforts that are lacking in love. The churches are called upon to cherish and love and hold each other in their hearts while accepting each others specificity. This can only be accomplished through the Holy Spirit, which allows real and unconditional love to fill the churches. Therefore, the heads of the Eastern Churches are called upon to meet together again and again in order to develop real love for each other and to be able to work together.

Ecumenical Dialogue

Since the beginning of the 20th century the ecumenical movement has been a major feature affecting the Christian Church worldwide. This movement is the main gateway to the future for Eastern Churches.

The general principle is to accept a basic premise, which most Eastern Churches have not yet accepted: that Jesus Christ

established One Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Church. Church leaders have not been faithful to Jesus' will. Every single church has to bear part of the responsibility for the various divisions within the Church. So the different churches, including the Eastern Churches, are called upon to do some honest and humble soul-searching before God who sent his son to "gather the scattered children of God" and who prayed on the eve of his crucifixion "that they might be one."

Talk about the ecumenical movement is long and complicated. I will dwell only on some of the aspects of this movement.

The Theological Perspective

The division among Christians abolishes the very foundation of the Church and its mission. The Church is a communion or a shared spiritual life among people. The mystical communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the paradigm, the source and the purpose of this communion within the Church. As such, every division goes against the Christian call for unity, which is the very foundation of the Church. Eastern Churches have to accept this fact and allow themselves to be led into the ecumenical movement by a desire to unify the children of God. This means getting rid of the complex of "orthodoxy" which desires to unite all Christians within its fold. Perhaps the first practical step to do this is to acknowledge the presence of a real though incomplete communion with all the other churches.

The Ecumenical Mentality

This means that the Eastern Churches have to go along with the general conviction of the Christian Church that no one church can claim sole representation of the whole of the Christian faith, outside of which there can be no salvation. The ecumenical mentality admits that the Church that Jesus desired is still a long way from realization. Church leaders bear the responsibility for this fact.

A divided Church also stands in the way of spreading the Gospel and having a vibrant and effective Christian presence in society. Again, it is the reason behind the fruitlessness of the painstaking efforts to instill a spirit of revival into the life of the Church.

An ecumenical mentality accepts the other and searches for the richness of the other to be used for the good of all.

The Spirituality of Ecumenism

Christian unity cannot be accomplished through dialogue on the level of theologians. Ecumenism is a spirituality that entails the renewal of the Church, repentance of the heart and a life of holiness and prayer. A change of heart must take place on the level of individuals through inner renewal, modesty, humility and generosity towards others. The whole community must also repent and turn away from structures and social norms that lead to sinfulness and division within the Church.

Individual and collective repentance manifest's itself in the life of the churches, which are the springboards of the movement towards unity. This movement must include the Bible and liturgical studies, preaching the word of God and Christian education. Last but not least is the importance of prayer and asking God's forgiveness, guidance and strength.

This spiritual dimension of the ecumenical movement leads to better knowledge of and solidarity with all Christians. We must all move from an attitude of opposition and conflict to one that sees in the other a brother, a sister and a partner. Every time renewal and change take place in one church, it is reflected in the other churches. Each discovers in the other new paradigms of holiness and experience limitless richness of the communion of saints. New and yet undiscovered methods of Christian

commitment are also manifested through the experience of other churches.

Ecumenical Dialogue

What has been said about the theological, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the ecumenical movement is bound to lead to practical dialogue based on love, truth, and pastoral care. This is the essence of the Holy Spirit, which seeks to gather together eastern churches into one Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church of Christ.

A Dialogue of Love

Patriarch Ignatius IV of the Orthodox Church of Antioch has said that the ecumenical movement is not a matter of theological or dogmatic compromise but rather a story of love. When love is lacking or misdirected, it can hurt and lead to suspicion which in turn kills love. Hence, it is imperative that a dialogue of love between the churches is preceded by a dialogue of truth that can provide support, nurture, and spirit in order to overcome human limitations and inhibitions.

The Dialogue of Truth

The dialogue of truth or theological dialogue involves a methodological study by delegates of the different churches, of the revelation of truth and the different ways of its expression and practice. The purpose is to overcome inherited stereotypes and misunderstandings and to reach, if possible, a common understanding of the mystery of the Christian faith while allowing for a diversity of tradition. Pope John XXIII summarized the issue beautifully when he said: "In basic issues: unity; in side issues: diversity; in all issues: love.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to give a glimpse of the history of the Eastern churches over 2000 years. It is important to point out that the mere fact that these churches carry such a long history places them in a position of respect, admiration and love.

Eastern churches have a basic role to play in this dialogue of truth. Although, at first glance, they fear getting involved in such dialogue because of an accumulation of suspicion and "closure" and the fear of being assimilated by churches that have fallen into the temptation of authoritarianism. The areas in which the Eastern Churches can contribute in the dialogue of truth are its invaluable perspectives on the sacrament of episcopacy, the theology of the local Church, the theory of the "universality of the bishop and the theology of the Holy Spirit." In this way eastern churches will share their rich theological and spiritual heritage with the other churches and be enriched by them so that both can understand more deeply the "mystery of God" and the "mystery of the Church."

Dialogue on the Pastoral Level

Pastoral work is the "theological context" that opens the way for churches to work together and complement the ecumenical dialogue that is already being held between them. It is important to point out that churches must refrain from trying to convert the faithful from one church to another for the sake of "their salvation." They should be helped to discover and develop their mission in their own mother Church. This has been emphasized by representatives of Catholic and Orthodox Churches at the Balamand meeting in 1993: "Efforts towards reunification should not aim at converting people from one Church to another. It is rather a joint effort for the fulfillment of the will of Christ in those who believe in him, as well as the fulfillment of God's purpose for God's Church. It is a joint effort of all the churches in order to reach total agreement on the meaning of faith and all that it entails.""

Eastern Churches in the Holy Land are the historic continuation of the first Church of Jerusalem, the mother of all churches. In spite of all their weaknesses, divisions and sins they remain the mother church that loves her children, prays for them, receives them with an open heart and asks for their support and prayers.

Eastern churches have seen more difficult times than they are going through nowadays. They have been strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit and survived. Although they are sometimes overshadowed by the human sinfulness of their members, they remain the light and guidance in the context that God has chosen for their witness, their mission and their worship.

Eastern Churches are called upon to take a leap of faith into the fire of the spirit – the master of history – and be purified and purged of historical flaws that burden them and stop their process towards the Trinity. If they succeed in achieving that, they can move forward freely towards complete unity. They can put their hand in that of the other sister churches and proclaim to the whole world that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16). It is then that the world will discover that Christ is its heart.

NOTES:

1. Acts 15.
2. Historian Eusebius 4 - 6.
3. Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East, *So that they will all be one, Ecumenical movement*, Easter 1999, No 10-11.
4. Patriarch Ignatius IV, *From Antiochian Experience To Its Mission*, p. 21.
5. Catholic Orthodox Encounter, Balamand (Lebanon) 1993.
6. Koinonia is a basic concept of the second Vatican Council concerning the Church ... Gathering the faithful as one people.... "The light of nations," No. 9.
7. Rebelief's Icon of the Trinity.
8. Rev. Jamal Khader, *Identity of the Local Church across the ages*, p. 4.
9. Acts of the Second Vatican Council, *Creed Dogmatic of the Church*, light of nations, 23.
10. Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Church, *Mystery of the Church* no. 33
11. Message of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient, "So that they will be one", April 1994.
12. Patriarch Ignatius IV, *The Ecumenical Issue in Light of the Antiochian Experience*, p. 34.
13. Ibid. p. 34.
14. Patriarchs of the Orient, *So that they will all be one*, April 1994, p. 20.
15. Ibid. p. 29.
16. Ibid. p. 15.
17. Patriarch Ignatius IV, lecture in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, 1984, p. 44.
18. *So that they will all be one*, p.34.
19. For example, Eastern Churches regard the local Church as Christ's Church in this country, which is the right way to see it. What those churches cannot as yet comprehend fully is a clear understanding of the Church Universal which is a visible communion of the local church, under one leadership that can gather all the Churches in the communion of faith and love. This is the cause of the difficult and futile debate over the role of the Bishop of Rome and his position as the first among equals.
20. Balamund document, 15.