



ORIENTALIUM DIGNITAS

On the Churches of the East by Pope Leo XIII November 30, 1894

The Churches of the East are worthy of the glory and reverence that they hold throughout the whole of Christendom in virtue of those extremely ancient, singular memorials that they have bequeathed to us. For it was in that part of the world that the first actions for the redemption of the human race began, in accord with the all-kind plan of God. They swiftly gave forth their yield: there flowered in first blush the glories of preaching the True Faith to the nations, of martyrdom, and of holiness. They gave us the first joys of the fruits of salvation. From them has come a wondrously grand and powerful flood of benefits upon the other peoples of the world, no matter how far-flung. When blessed Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, intended to cast down the manifold wickedness of error and vice, in accord with the will of Heaven, he brought the light of divine Truth, the Gospel of peace, freedom in Christ to the metropolis of the Gentiles.

It has most especially been the habit of the Roman Church, the head of all the Churches, to render to the Churches of the East a great degree of honor and love in remembrance of the Apostles, to rejoice in her turn in their faithful obedience. Amidst changing and difficult times, she has never failed in any way in farsightedness and acts of kindness to sustain them against the forces that would strike them again and again, to hold fast to those that were overwhelmed, to call back those in discord with her. Nor was it the last expression of her watchfulness that she guard and preserve in them whole and entire forever the customs and distinct forms for administering the sacraments that she had declared legitimate in her wise jurisdiction. Examples of this are the many decisions of Our Predecessors, in the first place Pius IX of happy memory, promulgated in their own pontifical acts or through documents issuing from the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. We ourselves have felt the prompting of no lesser zeal. At the very beginning of Our Pontificate, We turned eyes full of love towards the Christian nations of the East. We made haste, in fact, to direct Our solicitude to alleviating their state of want. We then saw the beginning of other opportunities for bearing

witness to Our feelings of kind regard and expressing them in deeds. But nothing was nor is more important, nothing more sacred than to kindle the ardor, to elicit fruitfulness in the Faith in those souls in union with the Apostolic See, so that they shine forth as renewed proofs of the excellence and glory of their ancestors. It has been possible to offer these Churches some assistance. We have founded in this very City a college for the formation of Armenian and Maronite clergy, likewise at Plovdiv and Edirne for those of the Bulgarian rite. We have decreed the construction of the Leonianum in Athens. We have fostered in larger measure the Seminary of St. Anne that was begun for the instruction of the Greek Melkite clergy in Jerusalem. Our activity includes increasing the number of Syrian students in the Urbanianum, restoring the Athanasianum for the Greeks to its pristine condition. This is the institute that Gregory XIII, its generous founder, wisely wished built. From it have issued men of great renown. We ardently wish - now all the more intensely - that We shall be able to cause and see with Our own eyes more activity of this and like type. God willing, We shall bring this plan long considered to completion by a unique letter of appeal to all leaders and peoples of the world, calling them to blessed unity in the divine Faith. Clearly, out of all the Christian nations that have been torn away from Us, We have striven to call out to the Christians of the East in the first place, to exhort them, to beseech them with the most heartfelt and paternal love.

We have begun to have hope, We are fostering it because its realization would be a great cause for joy, and, it is a fact, We are pursuing more strenuously this work so profitable for the salvation of many. Our goal is to discharge to the utmost degree whatever may be hoped for from the prudent direction of the Apostolic See. The reasons for rivalry and suspicion must be removed; then the fullest energies can be marshaled for reconciliation. We consider this of paramount importance to preserving the integrity proper to the discipline of the Eastern Churches. For Our part, We have ever rendered extreme attention and concern for this endeavor. In this vein, We have already given instructions for establishing schools to form young clerics of their nationalities. We shall give a like instruction for erecting other institutes. In them the students will cultivate their rites with the greatest devotion, observe them, and have full knowledge of their usages. In point of fact there is more importance than can be believed in preserving the Eastern rites. Their antiquity is august, it is what gives nobility to the different rites, it is a brilliant jewel for the whole Church, it confirms the God-given unity of the Catholic Faith.

For that very reason, even as her Apostolic origin is all the more proven especially by these Churches of the East, at the selfsame moment there shines out and is made manifest these Churches' original, complete unity with the Roman Church. Nothing else, perhaps, is so breathtakingly effective for illustrating the mark of Catholicity in God's Church than that striking sight of differing forms of ceremonies and noble examples of the tongues of the ancient past - made all the more noble by their use by the Apostles and Fathers - rendering their submission to the Church. This is almost an image of that most excellent submission that was rendered to the newly-born Christ, the divine Founder of the Church, when the Magi were drawn from the different regions of the East and came to adore Him¹.

At this place it is opportune to notice the fact that the sacred rites, although not instituted specifically for proving the truth of the dogmas of the Catholic Faith incontrovertibly, are effectively the living voice of Catholic Truth, the oft-sounded expression of it. For that very reason the true Church of Christ, even as she shows great zeal to guard inviolate those forms of divine worship - since they are hallowed and are not to be changed - sometimes grants or permits something novel in the performance of them in certain instances. This she does especially when they are in conformity with their venerable antiquity. By this means, her vitality does not appear ever-aging; she stands out more wondrously as the very Bride of Christ whom the wisdom of the Holy Fathers recognized in prefigurement in the words of David: The queen stood at your right hand arrayed in apparel embroidered with spun gold she is clothed with embroidery of diverse figures and spun gold fringe².

Inasmuch as this diversity of liturgical form and discipline of the Eastern Churches is approved in law, besides its other merits, it has redounded tremendously to the glory and usefulness of the Church. They ought not figure any less as subjects of Our charge. So much is this the case that it is in the best interest of all that their discipline not haphazardly borrow anything that would be ill-suited from Western ministers of the Gospel whom love for Christ compels to go to those peoples. The decisions that Our illustrious Predecessor Benedict XIV in his wisdom and foresight decreed in the Constitution of 24 December 1743 remain in force. This constitution was addressed as a letter to the Greek Melkite Patriarch of Antioch and to all the Bishops of that rite subject to him. The truth is that in the long course of time, given that the state of affairs has changed in those regions, that Latin rite missionaries and institutes have multiplied there as well, it now happens that some of the special concerns of the Apostolic See on the new conditions should be set out.

Frequently in recent years We recognized that this would be very useful: Our Venerable Brethren, the Patriarchs in the East, confirmed Our desires in very similar terms more than once in correspondence. That the result of this deliberation might be made more plain and intelligible and that well-suited, far-sighted plans be defined, We thought it well to invite those same Patriarchs to Rome and confer with them over what they might advise. Then We convened in Our presence a meeting with them that was well attended by some of Our beloved sons, the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, to deliberate on this matter. After weighing carefully and with due reflection all those matters that were put forward and discussed in conference, We resolved to make more explicit and far-reaching certain of the measures set out in the Constitution of Benedict XIV that would be more in keeping with the new state of affairs prevailing in these nations. For the execution of this, We single out this directive from among them as their fundamental condition for success: Latin rite priests are to be sent to those regions by the Apostolic See only for the purpose of assisting or helping the Patriarchs or Bishops there. The former are to be careful not to use the faculties granted them for acting in a way prejudicial to the Patriarchs or Bishops or for reducing the number of their subjects³. By the force of these laws, evidently, the duties of the Latin clergy are to be kept within their proper limits in their relations with the

Eastern rite hierarchy.

Inasmuch as the following protocols have seemed proper to ordain and sanction in Our Lord, by Our Apostolic Authority We do declare now that it is Our will and decree that the aforesaid decree of Benedict XIV originally promulgated respecting the Greek Melkites, now apply globally to all the faithful of any Eastern rite whatever.

I.

II. Any Latin rite missionary, whether of the secular or religious clergy, who induces with his advice or assistance any Eastern rite faithful to transfer to the Latin rite, will be deposed and excluded from his benefice in addition to the ipso facto suspension a divinis and other punishments that he will incur as imposed in the aforesaid Constitution Demandatam. That this decree stand fixed and lasting We order a copy of it be posted openly in the churches of the Latin rite.

III.

IV. When an Eastern Patriarch lacks a priest of his own rite to whom he may entrust the spiritual governance of his own subjects, a pastor of another rite may undertake the care of those parishioners. He is to consecrate the same species, i.e., azyme or leavened bread, that the parishioners' rite employs. Priests of an Eastern rite are to be preferred. To the faithful it is granted to receive Communion in any rite, not only in those locales where there is no church or priest of their own rite - as in the decree of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith of 18 August 1893 - but also, when owing to the great distance of a church of their own rite, they are unable to assist except with serious inconvenience. In this case the judgment belongs to the Ordinary. This principle remains unchanged: One who receives Communion in another rite, even for a long time, is not on that account to be considered to have changed his rite. As regards all other obligations, he continues to be subject to the pastor of his parish.

V.

VI. Latin rite societies of religious men that are engaged in the education of the young in the East, if they have a large number of Eastern rite students in their institute, are to consult with the Patriarch and provide for the benefit of these students in their institute a priest of the same rite for the celebration of the Sacred Synaxis, that is, the Sacrifice of the Mass, for the teaching of catechism in their native tongue, and explaining their ritual. At the least, they are to obtain such a priest to fulfill these duties on Sundays and holy days of obligation. For this reason, We decree that any privileges that students of an Eastern rite follow the Latin rite in these institutes that these societies may enjoy, even those deserving special mention, are removed. The institutes' directors may employ religious discretion regarding the keeping of the fasts prescribed. Like provisions are to be made for day students. They must be sent back or induced to attend their own parish churches, unless it seem appropriate that they be admitted to the same sacred rites as the boarding students.

VII.

VIII. The same provisions are to be applied to the fullest degree possible in institutes of religious women dedicated to the education of girls in convents or schools. But if any change in these provisions seems beneficial, owing to particular

conditions or circumstances, they are not to be enacted before the Patriarch give his assent and it be ratified by the Apostolic See.

IX.

X. New schools or religious houses of the Latin rite for either gender are not to be opened in future except by a grant of a petition to the Apostolic See.

XI.

XII. It is not lawful for Latin or Eastern rite priests to give absolution, either in churches of their own rite or those of another rite, in cases that are reserved to the subject's Ordinary, unless the faculty has been granted by them. We entirely revoke any privilege to the contrary of these prescriptions, even one worthy of specific mention.

XIII.

XIV. Any person of an Eastern rite who has transferred to the Latin rite, even when this has been authorized by Pontifical rescript, shall be permitted to return to his original rite, upon petitioning the Apostolic See.

XV.

XVI. A woman of the Latin rite who marries a man of an Eastern rite, and likewise a woman of an Eastern rite who marries a man of the Latin rite, has the freedom to transfer to her husband's rite at the beginning of or any time during their marriage. When the marriage bond is ended, she will have the power to resume her former rite.

XVII.

XVIII. Anyone of an Eastern rite that resides outside the patriarchal territory will be under the administration of the Latin clergy; he shall, however, remain reckoned as belonging to his own rite. By means of this, neither length of time nor any other reason shall in any way alter his being subject to his Patriarch once he return to his territory.

XIX.

XX. It is not lawful for any Latin rite Order or Religious Institute for either gender to receive into their society anyone of an Eastern rite who will not have first presented testimonial letters of his own Ordinary.

XXI.

XXII. If any community, family, or person from among the dissidents come to Catholic unity but make it almost a necessary condition that they embrace the Latin rite, they may remain bound to the obligations of this rite for the time being. It will remain, however, in their power at any time in the future to return to their native Catholic rite. If such a condition not be interposed, but the community, family, or person is under the administration of Latin rite priests because of a lack of ones of an Eastern rite, they are to be restored to the practice of their proper rite as soon as there are enough Eastern rite priests.

XXIII.

XXIV. Any cases whatever for a matrimonial or other ecclesiastical tribunal over which an appeal be made to the Apostolic See, are in no way to be decided by the Apostolic Delegates except they be expressly authorized. All such cases are to be referred to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.

XXV.

XXVI. We have granted to the Greek Melkite Patriarch jurisdiction also over those faithful of the same rite who reside within the Ottoman Empire. Besides these specific precautions and regulations of law, as We touched on above, We have the greatest concern that seminaries, schools, and institutes of all types be built in more advantageous locales in the East, and most especially those for the priestly formation of native men in their own ancestral rite to help their own people. We have resolved upon this course of action; it is difficult to say with just how much zeal and devotion We hope to attempt it, to advance it, relying greatly, as We do, upon the support and resources of Catholics. We recently made clear in an encyclical letter that We issued last year on the erection of colleges for clergy in East India, that the efforts of indigenous priests, since they direct them in ways more congruent with their Churches' particular situation and undertake them more avidly, will be more fruitful than those of foreigners. Thus in future, steps having definitively been taken for the sacred instruction of youths, distinction in theological and biblical studies will increase among Eastern rite Catholics. Their erudition in ancient languages will be just as strong as their aptitude for modern ones. Their perceptiveness in doctrine and scholarship, in which the Fathers and their writers overflowed, will more broadly advance the common good. From this most desired outcome may arise in the end an increased knowledge of the truths of the faith among the Catholic priesthood. They may then commend to others their own bright example of integral knowledge, and Our dissident brethren may seek out more readily the embrace of their Mother, the Church. If then the clerical orders unite their spirits, their zeal, their energies in true fraternal charity, with God's grace and guidance, the most auspicious day will quickly arrive when, as all are come together to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God; thereby, fully and completely, the whole body (being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system according to the functioning in due measure of each single part) derives its increase to the building up of itself in love⁴. Doubtless, she alone can exult in being the true Church of Christ, in whom the one body and one Spirit⁵ subsist. Assuredly, Our Venerable Brethren, the Patriarchs, Archbishops, and Bishops of whatever Eastern Catholic rite will undertake with all reverence and obedience each and every of these Our decrees in virtue of that piety that they manifest for the Apostle's Chair and for Ourselves, as also in virtue of their solicitude for their own Churches. In their zeal they will cause their complete observance by those whom these decrees concern. The abundance of fruits that may thereby then rightfully and with certainty be expected will come forth especially from the labor of those who represent Our Person throughout the Christian East. It is Our will that the Apostolic Delegates respect with due reverence the traditions established by the ancestors of these nations as a highly esteemed prize. They are to pay suitable honor to the authority of the Patriarchs, and take pains that this honor be given. In the conduct of their duties with them, they will follow the Apostle's counsel: Anticipate one another with honor⁶. They are to act with enthusiasm and good will for the bishops, clergy, and people, recalling in themselves that spirit with which the Apostle John conducted himself when he gave

the Apocalypse to the seven Churches that are in Asia, greeting them: Grace be to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come⁷.

In every course of action let them show themselves true heralds and peacemakers of holy unity between the Eastern Churches and the Roman Church, which is the center of unity and charity. In accord with what We herein exhort and command, Latin rite priests who go to these excellent labors in the regions of the East for the eternal salvation of souls are to display like sentiments, conduct themselves in like fashion. God will truly give abundant increase to those who toil religiously in obedience to the Roman Pontiff.

Therefore, whatever We have determined, declared, and sanctioned in this letter, We will and command to be kept inviolate by all to whom they pertain; these prescriptions cannot be stigmatized, called into dispute, nor infringed for any reason, excuse, or pretext, including one arising from privilege. They have full and complete force, notwithstanding any Apostolic constitutions, even those issued in general and provincial councils, any statutes, customs, and prescriptions confirmed by Apostolic rescript or any other writ. We specifically and expressly modify and will to be modified all laws according to the sense of the foregoing letter just as if they had been emended in this letter word by word, as well as all other acts whatever of a contrary intention. It is Our will that copies of this Letter be printed, subscribed by Our Notary and once sealed by this person constituted for this ecclesiastical dignity have the same authority as this Letter would when presented. Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, the thirtieth of November, in the year of Our Lord's Incarnation one thousand eight hundred ninety-four, the seventeenth of Our Pontificate.

1. Mt 2:2. 2. Ps 44:14-15. 3. Const. Demandatam, 13. 4. Eph. 4:13, 16. 5. Eph. 4:4. 6. Rom. 12:10. 7. Rev. 1:4.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION: Edward Stickland, 1996. as found in *The Vatican and the Eastern Christian Churches: Papal Encyclicals and Documents concerning the Eastern Churches*. Volume. Eastern Christian Publications: Fairfax, Virginia, 1996; pp. 179-189.