

## **...And Diversity in Unity**

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Eastern Catholics share many things in common with their Latin Catholic brothers and sisters. They also have their own particularities which make them to be distinctively Eastern. A few “whys” may serve you better than a long list of “whats.” Knowing the facts that we use leavened bread, that we surround the celebration of the Word and the Eucharist with a different ritual or follow our own liturgical calendar is not the key for understanding our particularity. These and many other practical differences are in themselves not very important. It is rather that taken together they concretize a theology and a spirituality which is Eastern and not Western.

The way we approach liturgy and the values and expectations we bring to it may serve as an example. Your liturgy represents a way of responding to the greatness and the holiness of God’s presence: a certain kind of sober reserve and directness and an unwillingness to “waste time.” In other words, you bring many cultural values and rules of polite behavior for receiving any dignitary and apply them to worship. We do the same thing: it’s simply that the rules and values we bring with us are different.

Good Roman liturgy is orderly; clergy and congregation come in, go to their places and stay there until needed. Nothing is more destructive of good Roman liturgy than someone moving around out of place “trying to be helpful.” Good Roman liturgy is concise; your liturgical texts say what they have to say and they end. Take the collects or opening prayers of your liturgy as an example. They are brief and virtually all follow a model which I might typify as “God, because this is so, we ask you to do thus and such. Amen.” Your Mass may be quite simply recited, or it may be quite elaborate with choirs and musical instrumental. Variety and

creativity are values for you, and if you live in a typical parish you have a liturgy committee which spends a lot of time selecting hymns, planning the important liturgies of the year, etc.

We bring a different set of values to our Liturgy and we follow eastern rules of politeness and hospitality. We greet the greatness and holiness of God's presence with ceremony, every flattery. Liturgical texts are long and God can not be mentioned without including a few adjectives referring to God's goodness, mercy, power and providence. You may find our texts as prolix as we find yours terse.

For us, the Liturgy is our first experience of the life of heaven where we will sing the praises of God for all eternity. This is why a Byzantine church is constructed with an icon screen and its central gates standing before the sanctuary within which stands the altar or Holy Table, and there are icons of the saints all about the church. We are in God's presence in the company of the saints. If the walls of the church are frescoed in the traditional Byzantine fashion, the icons of the saints never come all the way to the floor, only to about the shoulder level to remind us that we have our particular space in which we must live our out Christian lives.

Byzantine practice knows only the sung Liturgy, and it is the liturgical text itself which we sing. In our tradition we sing the Liturgy; we do not sing *at* the Liturgy. There are almost no places in any of our liturgical services where we need to decide what to sing. On any given Sunday, we may use a different melody for a particular text, but the liturgical text itself is quite fixed. There will be no big discussion about what to do for Pascha ("Easter") this year, we will do and sing the same things we've been doing and singing for centuries. Variety is not a liturgical value for us; the value for us is familiarity. That value makes it possible for an average parish to have a beautiful celebration of a rather complex

liturgy without a great deal of worry about the details of production, and allows the worshipper to have a deeper level of attention. A service where we had to search through hymn books or a “creative” liturgy would be terribly distracting for us.

For us the Liturgy and the various offices such as Matins and Vespers are the bearers of Christian Tradition. The liturgical texts have a significant theological content and the entire liturgical action and text, not just the reading of the Word and the homily are didactic. We possess our theological and spiritual traditions primarily as liturgy and prayer. Take, for example, this text which we sing whenever we celebrate the Eucharist:

“O only begotten Son and Word of God, although you are immortal, you condescended for our salvation to take flesh of the holy God-bearer and without undergoing change you became incarnate. You were crucified for us, Christ God, and by your death you trampled upon death, you who are one of the Holy Trinity and are glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit; save us.”

Every time we celebrate the Liturgy we sing and pray our catechism!

In the course of the Liturgy there will be incensations all around the church, processions with the Gospel book and with the bread and wine for the Eucharist. People will reach out to touch the gospel book as it is carried by. Bodily posture is important also, whether it be making prostrations during Lent or standing on Sundays and during the Easter season to celebration the resurrection. Light, color, motion, smell, posture, all these inclusions of our human bodiliness in our prayer, are part of Eastern liturgical and spiritual tradition. As another example, our people tend to take the fasting seasons seriously, but our tradition

also has festal periods during which all fasting is forbidden!

We could detail many other differences, but the important message is that these particular differences form a coherent whole which has its basis in certain values and ways of understanding God and ourselves. We don't claim their superiority; we do claim their authenticity as traditional Christian values, and it is this Christian authenticity which we are determined to preserve within the Catholic communion.