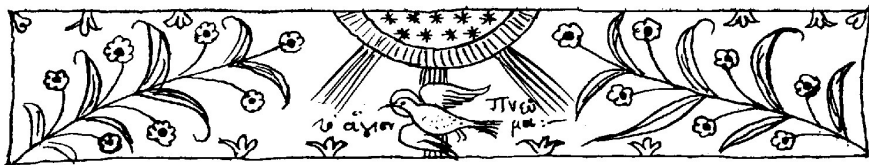


*What are some of the
similarities and differences
between
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An Orthodox Christian View

by Father Steven Tsichlis



What are some of the similarities and differences between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians?

Similarities—what we share

"Among western Christians," writes Metropolitan Kallistos Ware in his book *The Orthodox Church*, "it is the Roman Catholics with which Orthodoxy has by far the most in common."

Why would this be so? First and foremost, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have more than 1,000 years of shared history: both go back to the beginnings of Christianity, to the time of the Apostles. Rome is the place of martyrdom for both St. Peter and St. Paul; and

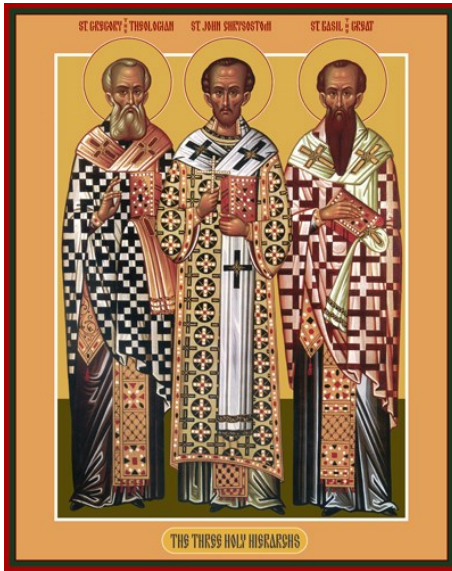


apostolic succession in both teaching and Church leadership is important to both communities. It was just before the battle of the Milvian Bridge near Rome that the emperor Constantine had his now famous vision of a Cross in the sky, a vision that changed the history of Western Europe and led to the establishment of the city of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire for more than a millennium. But few Orthodox Christians realize that it was Constantine who also built the first St. Peter's Basilica in the 4th century, a church

that remained standing for nearly a thousand years, until the current St. Peter's was built in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Because of this shared history, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians share belief in God as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and Christ as the Word of God incarnate, both fully human and fully divine, crucified for the forgiveness of our sins and risen from the dead that we might have eternal life, as proclaimed in the Scriptures and the teaching of the first seven Ecumenical Councils. Both communities of faith understand worship to be liturgical (Biblically structured) and share a focus on the Eucharist and the sacramental life. The basic structure of the Divine Liturgy and the Mass are therefore very similar. And both Churches believe that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Christ. Although Orthodox Christians have never formally numbered the sacraments at seven as have Roman Catholics since the 16th century Council of Trent, Orthodox Christians today customarily do speak of seven sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Confession, Marriage, Ordination and the Anointing of the Sick. The sacraments—or “mysteries” as Orthodox Christians often refer to them—are the ways that Christ and the Holy Spirit draw us to encounter the one, true and living God in His Church.

We share a deep veneration for the saints, asking for their intercession, and actually celebrate the memory of saints from the first millennium of Christian history in common: St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian are all canonized saints in the Roman Catholic Church; St. Patrick of Ireland, St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Ambrose of Milan are all canonized saints in the Orthodox Church. And although there are some differences – which will be discussed



below - both Churches have a devotion to the ever-virgin Mary, the *Theotokos* or Mother of God.

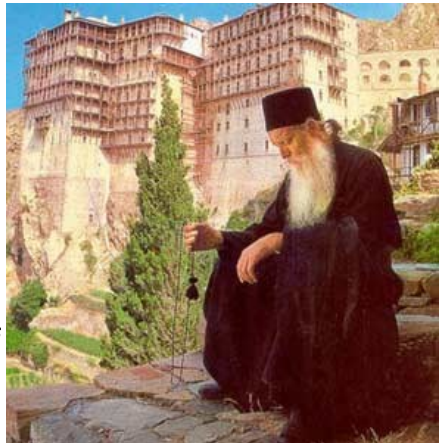
Roman Catholic Bibles are much closer in content to Orthodox Christian Bibles than to the version of the Bible read by Protestants. Like Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics have more books in their Old Testament canon than do Protestants. Preserving far more ancient traditions

concerning the Christian Biblical canon, Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic Bibles include the books of *Baruch*; *Tobit*; *Judith*; *First, Second and Third Maccabees*; *First and Second Esdras*; the *Wisdom of Solomon*; the *Wisdom of Sirach*; the *Letter of Jeremiah* and an expanded version of the book of *Daniel*. Protestant Bibles contain none of these books.

Both communities have a strong sense of the importance of the Church - as the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (*1 Timothy 3:15*) - for Christian living and ultimately, salvation. Both communities of faith have patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons - an ordered structure of leadership based on the Scriptures (although Orthodox Christianity has no person equivalent to the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church and therefore no college of cardinals - a late medieval development - to elect the Pope).

Unlike Protestantism, both Orthodoxy and Catholicism

include the monastic life—a Christian lifestyle that is consecrated by the devotional practices of celibacy, asceticism, prayer and worship—although Orthodoxy does not have the various orders of monks and nuns - such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines, Carthusians, Jesuits, etc. - that initially sprung up in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, as does Catholicism. Because there is no such thing as monastic orders in Eastern Christianity, Orthodoxy does not draw as sharp a distinction between the “contemplative” and “active” orders of monks (and nuns) as one often finds in Catholicism. Orthodox Christians have recently canonized monastic saints of the 20th century like St. Silouan of Mt. Athos (1866-1938) and St. Maria Skobtsova of Paris (1891-1945); Roman Catholics have recently canonized monastic saints like St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) and St. Pio of Pietrelcina (1887-1968).



Differences—where we respectfully disagree

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable difference between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy is that Orthodox Christians have no single person, no single bishop, in our Church who would be the equivalent of the pope in the Roman Catholic Church. Orthodox Christians therefore do not accept the dogma proclaimed in 1870 at the First Vatican Council that the pope is “infallible” - i.e., that he cannot err - when he speaks *ex cathedra* on “matters of faith and morals.” Nor do Orthodox Christians accept the teaching that the pope has what Roman Catholic theologians call “immediate ordinary jurisdiction”

over every Christian Church in the world by virtue of his



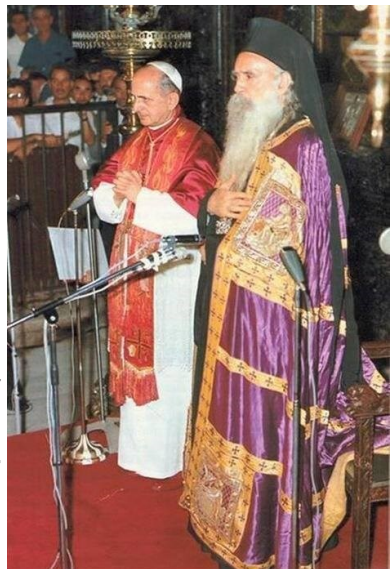
"supreme apostolic authority." No patriarch or bishop in the Orthodox Church can lay claim to such authority or power. However, Orthodox Christians do not reject a certain primacy of the pope, provided it is understood that the pope's relationship to other bishops in the Church is that of "first among equals" or in Latin, *primus inter pares*. For us, the Pope may be best described as "the elder brother,

not the supreme ruler" to use the words of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware.

The second most immediately obvious difference between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy is the celibacy of priests. Roman Catholic priests of the Latin rite are required to be celibate; Orthodox clergy are not required to be celibate, although they may choose to be celibate if they wish. However, celibacy is not a precondition for ordination to the priesthood in Orthodoxy as it is in Roman Catholicism. The overwhelming majority of Orthodox clergy both today and in the past are married men with children. Interestingly enough, for the first thousand years of Christian history, Western European clergy were not required to be celibate; and celibacy, as modern Roman Catholic theologians remind us, is merely a spiritual discipline and not a dogma of the Western

Church. Roman Catholic clergy were officially required to be celibate at the 1st Lateran Council that met in 1123AD, a little less than 75 years after the schism between the two Churches in 1054AD when papal legates visiting Constantinople excommunicated Patriarch Michael Cerularius of Constantinople. Fortunately, in 1965, that excommunication was lifted by Pope Paul VI (1897-1978) and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople (1886-1972) as an initial step of goodwill in working towards the unity of our two Churches. As a result, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have engaged in dialogue with one another at the international, national and local levels more in the last 50 years than in the previous 500.

Another, more theologically subtle but no less important difference between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy lies in the wording of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed used by both Churches. The Creed, which is recited at every Liturgy in the Orthodox Church, is the work of the first two ecumenical or worldwide councils held in 325AD and 381AD. In essence, the Creed is meant to be a short summary of the essential teachings of the Christian faith based on the Scriptures, and its text remains unchanged within Orthodoxy to this day. However, Western Christians added one word to the Creed - in Latin *filioque* - altering the original text of the Creed to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also "from the Son" or *filioque*. This addition to the text of the Creed was made for the first time at a local council held in Toledo, Spain in 589AD. Although not initially



recognized as a legitimate addition to the Creed by the Church of Rome, it was eventually accepted by Pope Benedict VIII in 1024AD and proclaimed a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215AD. This somewhat unilateral tampering with the text of the Creed has always been rejected by Orthodoxy because the phrase that "the Holy Spirit...proceeds from the Father" is based on a Biblical text, John 15:26.



Some of the other readily visible differences include how Catholicism and Orthodoxy understand Christian art as a means of expressing the Gospel and praising God. Orthodox Christian Churches are normally filled with icons – a two dimensional art form done in paint or mosaic in which iconographers are governed by strict guidelines because their work is meant to be an expression of the Church's faith – but you will seldom find any Orthodox Church that uses statues of Christ and the saints, as is so commonly found in Catholic Churches. Nor are Roman Catholic artists governed by the same kinds of guidelines that Orthodox iconographers are. Roman Catholic art is therefore – by and large – more naturalistic and more artist centered than iconography, although icons have become increasingly popular in Catholicism in recent years.

While both Churches share a deep veneration for the *Theotokos* and ever-virgin Mary and her role in our

salvation as the Mother of our Savior, Orthodox Christians do not share the Roman Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary proclaimed as a dogma by Pope Pius IX in 1854. This dogma of the Roman Catholic Church maintains that Mary was free from the “stain” – in Latin, *macula* – of original sin from the moment of her conception. At best, Orthodox Christians think this to be something unnecessary to proclaim as a dogma – i.e., as a central tenet of the faith – and that it separates the Virgin Mary from the rest of the human race, seemingly putting her in a class of humanity apart from the rest of us. And while the Orthodox Church believes that the *Theotokos* died as all human beings do and that she was bodily assumed into heaven (as was, for example, the Prophet Elijah in the Old Testament—2 Kings 2:11), the Orthodox Church has never proclaimed her bodily assumption a dogma as did Pope Pius XII in 1950. “The doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity have been proclaimed as dogmas,” writes Metropolitan Ware, but there are no dogmas about the Virgin Mary *per se* in Orthodoxy.

For the Christian, Orthodoxy believes, there are but two ultimate alternatives, heaven and hell, as clearly witnessed to in the Scriptures.



There is, in Orthodoxy, no doctrine of purgatory as in Catholicism. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, purgatory is an intermediate state or place where those “who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified” must undergo “a cleansing fire” before being able to enter “the joy of heaven.” The word “purgatory” is first used as a

noun around 1160AD and is first clarified as Roman Catholic doctrine at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and referred to a state of being cleansed and making “satisfaction” for the temporal consequences of one’s sins before death. This led, in Western Europe, to the sale of indulgences—the monetary purchase of time off one’s sentence in purgatory—that eventually became one of the key factors that sparked the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Because the Orthodox Church does not teach the doctrine of purgatory, the sale of indulgences never became a problem in the East as it did in the West.

And while there are some differences in piety—different ways of making the sign of the cross, for example—these are of little or no theological significance and are not viewed as serious obstacles to unity in the ongoing ecumenical dialogue between our two Churches. While there is much that unites us as fellow Christians, there



are still theological questions that must be resolved before our two Churches can resume full communion with each other after almost 1,000 years of separation.

And all of us, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians alike, must work to the best of our ability for that unity which the Lord Jesus wants for His disciples (John 17:21).





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