Decrees on Eastern Churches (Orientalium Ecclesiarum) and Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)
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On December 4, 1963 (the last day of the second year) the Council passed their first two documents: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (a major accomplishment, calling for wide-ranging reform), and the decree on the Mass Media (a minor accomplishment, consisting mostly of platitudes).

Near the end of the third year on November 21, 1964, the Council passed three more documents: the Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), and two Decrees: on the Eastern Churches (Orientalium Ecclesiarum) and on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio). This was a major milestone.

Pope John had made his surprise announcement that he was convening an ecumenical council during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. He mentioned specifically that he wanted to update the Church (aggiornamento) and make some headway toward Christian unity. In addition to the Constitution on the Liturgy, these three documents had thoroughly engaged the bishops’ interests, but bringing all three of them to final votes was easier said than done. We have already discussed Lumen Gentium (which focused on “ourselves”) and now we consider another two, which involve reaching out to “others.”

Lumen Gentium was setting the stage for a more open relationship between the Catholic Church and those outside it by acknowledging that the Church is joined to others by baptism, Scripture, & belief in the Trinity (#15). A preliminary draft of Lumen Gentium had a chapter dedicated to ecumenical relations (Ch XI) but the drafting committee realized that it was getting too unwieldy; it was decided to compose a separate document that would deal with Eastern Catholic Rites, the Orthodox Churches, and Christian communities rooted in the Reformation.

There was a Vatican Curial Congregation responsible for the relationships with the Eastern Rites, and they presumed that they were the most enlightened authority on the whole subject. But Pope John decided to set up a new “Secretariat” for Christian Unity, appointing Cardinal Bea as the chair, with explicit instructions to research Christian unity and draw up proposals for how it might be done. This secretariat had a much more ecumenical slant. The result was that the Council Fathers got multiple documents to consider, and they could not come to a consensus about which draft to work with.

After much wrangling, they decided to consider four separate question: 1) The Eastern Catholic Rites (with merely a reference to the Orthodox Churches); 2) Ecumenical relationships with separated communions (with two distinguished groupings – the Orthodox Churches and “Ecclesial Communions” rooted in the Reformation); 3) Relationships with the Jews and other non-Christian religions; 4) Religious Freedom of Conscience.

We will consider the first two decrees here, and the third and fourth on December 7.

Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches (Orientalium Ecclesiarum)

After Constantine, the Roman Empire degenerated into two separate kingdoms, with the actual emperor residing in Constantinople, and a puppet governor in Rome. The Bishop of Rome (for example, Leo the Great), with an extensive apparatus of deacons and other clerics, began to assume all of the practical work of governing the “Western Empire.” By the year 500, they sent the puppet emperor packing back to Constantinople.

The long, tortured schism between East and West came to a climax of mutual excommunication in 1054, which affected mainly the Greek Byzantine churches. But some of the Eastern Orthodox churches (mainly focused on Antioch in Syria) became separated long before 1054, mainly over the disputes about the nature(s) of Christ, as articulated in the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).

On one hand, Nestorian churches held that Jesus had two distinct natures, human and divine, which are not “hypostatically” united. (This differs from the Arians, who believed that Jesus was strictly human.) These churches came to be known as the Assyrian Church of the East, tracing its roots to St. Thomas Apostle, and it spread great distances into India and even China. Over the centuries, mainly because of political changes, this schism split into two subgroups. One segment, mainly in Persia (modern Iran and Iraq), is known as the Chaldean Church, which entered into communion with the Catholic Church in 1553. The other branch was reunited with Rome in 1994 with the ‘Common Christological Declaration,’ signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV: “The main dogmatic problem between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church has been resolved.”

On the other hand, some churches held an apparently opposite position, claiming that Jesus had only one nature – Divine. The main church in this camp is the Armenian Church, which also has direct Apostolic roots. They claim...
that although they reject the Council of Chalcedon, they are not monophysite; rather, they argue that Christ has one incarnate nature, in which both divine and human natures are united (miaphysis). The Armenian Church officially severed ties with Rome and Constantinople in 554. In 1198 the Armenian king established a union between Rome and the Armenian Apostolic Church. This is the origin of the (fairly small) Catholic Armenian Rite.

Another church that separated at the Council of Chalcedon is the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, which goes back to St. Mark and is based in Egypt. A formal reconciliation between the Catholic and Coptic churches was proposed at the Council of Florence in 1442, but it was not supported and had no practical results. In 1741 a Coptic bishop in Jerusalem became Catholic, and this initiated a reunification with a small segment of the Copts.

In a related movement, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, formerly known as the Uniat Abyssinian Church, is an Eastern Catholic church, established in 1930. Its membership includes inhabitants of Ethiopia and Eritrea. This piecemeal "reunification" of splinter groups of Orthodox Christians took place sporadically over the centuries, but the main body of Orthodox Christians consider these groups as renegades and do not look kindly on them.

The Syriac Church of Antioch traces its origins to St. James. Some, such as the Maronite Church in Lebanon, have always maintained affiliation with the Church of Rome. The Melkites, also in Lebanon, were officially recognized as being in communion with Rome in 1725. Following the Second Vatican Council, some church leaders have been reassessing the Chalcedonian schism. For example, from several meetings between the authorities of Roman Catholicism and the Oriental Antiochean Orthodoxy, the following agreement was reached:

The confusion and schisms ... arose only because of differences in terminology and culture and in the various formulae adopted by different theological schools to express the same matter. Accordingly, we find today no real basis for the sad divisions and schisms that subsequently arose between us concerning the doctrine of Incarnation. In words and life we confess the true doctrine concerning Christ our Lord, notwithstanding the differences in interpretation of such a doctrine which arose at the time of the Council of Chalcedon.

(Declaration of Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Mar Zakka I Iwas, June 23, 1984.)

In the East, each national church maintains its distinct identity. Every Patriarch or Metropolitan is considered "autoccephalous," meaning that these chief archbishops are of equal rank, and generally independent in terms of administration; but they are united in their sharing in the True ("Orthodox") Faith, and they mention each other’s names in the Eucharistic Prayer. There are more than 20 Eastern rites.

Meanwhile, in the West, there were other rites besides the Roman rite – the Ambrosian in Milano, Mozarabic in Spain, Gallican in France, a Celtic rite, a Dominican rite, etc. Over time, these rites were gradually merged into the Latin rite, with the bishop of Rome being the centralizing "head" of all these churches.

From Rome’s point of view, the "Chair of Peter" is the head of the whole Catholic Church worldwide, so there is a specific Congregation for Eastern Rites in the Vatican. The functionaries in this Curia department are quite knowledgeable about all the historical developments of Eastern Christianity, but they took a very Roman-centric point of view, which the Eastern churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, considered outright arrogant. Clearly there was a need for the Vatican Council to make a specific statement about the Eastern Catholic churches.

#1-3 The Catholic church highly esteems the Eastern institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical life and way of Christian life, all rooted in the very preaching of the apostles, and nurtured by many Fathers of the Church. We are all organically united. All these churches are of equal dignity, none ranking above others.

#4 Steps must be taken to preserve the various rites throughout the world, so that wherever the faithful live they are able to preserve their cultural and religious heritage. [The modern migration of peoples created a new situation that had not been envisioned when virtually everyone in a specific rite lived in the same territory. A rule of thumb in Canon Law is “Church law is territorial; i.e., “When in Rome...” But that was resulting in Eastern rite people losing touch with their heritage because their churches had to abide by the Latin customs.]

#4 These various churches govern themselves according to their particular rules.

#7-11 Certain key bishops are known as “Patriarchs,” and this venerable custom is to be maintained. It may be necessary to set up new patriarchates.

#13-14 The venerable practices regarding administering Confirmation should be maintained or restored, and priests of either rite can confer this sacrament if it is for the good of the faithful.

#15 The faithful are obliged to participate in Sunday Divine Worship, and this can be done beginning with the time of First Vespers on Saturday.

#16 All Priests who have proper faculties from their own bishop can hear confessions of persons of any rite.
Much of this work was done during the Spring of 1964, and many bishops participated by writing comments. The Vatican apparatus considered this last-minute offer to be impossible, but with Cardinal Bea’s encouragement, Pope Paul accepted the invitation. Athenagoras and Paul met twice, on Jan 5 & 6, 1964. There were warm embraces and genuinely encouraging speeches, which were broadcast instantly around the world. Paul gave the Patriarch a chalice, as a symbolic hope for a time when they might be able to share the Eucharist, and Athenagoras gave Paul a pectoral cross as a symbol of mutual leadership between them. This meeting, widely covered and well photographed, gave a symbolic impetus encouraging the bishops to keep working on a draft for a potentially useful ecumenical decree. Much of this work was done during the Spring of 1964, and many bishops participated by writing comments.
All was not sweetness and light, however. Some of the Eastern Catholics (having weathered the scorn of their Orthodox cousins) were not in favor of ecumenical dialogue, and sided with the conservative Latin bishops who had their own theological reasons for opposing ecumenism. But Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, who was an outspoken participant at the council (for example, during the Liturgy debates), was a strong advocate for Catholic/Orthodox dialogue. He entered into the council debates frequently and vigorously. He did not know Latin, of course, so he used French (rather than the truly original church language Aramaic, or modern Arabic).

Maximos was present at the Jerusalem meeting, and he also met with Athenagoras, who told him, “You represent all of us. Thank You!” This encounter stimulated Maximos to journey throughout the Middle East, meeting as many Orthodox leaders as he could during the spring of 1964. Meanwhile, during the same months, Cardinal Lercaro, an important leader on the Council’s steering committee, also made several contacts in the Middle East. The ecumenical movement was gaining impetus and beginning to forge elements for consensus.

At first, the bishops presumed that the document on ecumenism would also consider Judaism, Islam and other world religions (which was being specified in Lumen Gentium), but this was making the discussion interminably complicated, for both religious and political reasons, so they determined to write a separate document on the Jews and other non-Christian religions.

The ecumenical movement is also based on a premise of Freedom of Conscience (the older Catholic position was that “error has no rights”) so the very notion of ecumenism would seem to be impossible. But that topic was also fraught with theological issues, so they decided to simply take freedom of conscience for granted, based on the universality of grace that they were agreeing to in Lumen Gentium, and they commissioned a committee to write a separate declaration on religious freedom. That left them to focus on three chapters on ecumenism.

Chapter I: Catholic Principles of Ecumenism

#2 Christ prayed “that they all be one,” and gave the church the Eucharist, “by which the unity of the church is both signified and made a reality.” The church is God’s only flock, like a standard lifted high, serving humanity through the gospel of peace.

#3.1 Through the centuries, large communities became separated from one another, and often enough people on both sides were to blame. The ecumenical movement strives to overcome these differences. “But even in spite of them it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in baptism are members of Christ’s Body, and have a right to be called Christians, and so are deservedly recognized as sisters and brothers in the Lord by the children of the catholic church.”

#3.2 Many of the elements that give life to the church can exist outside the visible boundaries of the catholic church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity; other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit. “All these come from Christ and led back to Christ, and properly belong to the one church of Christ.”

#3.5 “Nevertheless, our separated fellow Christians … are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those who through him were born again into one body, and with him quickened to new life… For it is only through Christ’s catholic church, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be attained. We believe that our Lord entrusted the blessings of the new covenant to the one apostolic college of which Peter is the head, in order to establish the one body of Christ on earth…”

#4.2 The term “ecumenical” involves several things:
1) Every effort must be made to avoid expressions and judgments that unfairly criticize other communities.
2) Dialogue between experts facilitates everyone gaining a truer knowledge of each communion.
3) There can be fuller cooperation in promoting the common good.
4) Prayer together should be encouraged whenever possible.
5) All can examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the church, undertaking renewal and reform.

#4.3 These actions, with the guidance of the bishops, will lead to justice and truth, collaboration, love and unity. “When the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion have been gradually overcome, all Christians will at last, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, be gathered into the unity of the one and only church. Christ bestowed this unity on his church from the beginning. We believe that it subsists in the catholic church as something she can never lose; and we cherish the hope that it will go on increasing until the end of time.”

#4.5 “All must preserve unity in essentials. But let all maintain a proper freedom in forms of spiritual life and discipline, liturgical rites, even in their theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail.”
### Chapter II The Practice of Ecumenism

| #7-8 | There can be no ecumenism without a change of heart. This change of heart and holiness of life is the soul of the whole movement, “spiritual ecumenism.” |
| #8.3 | Mutual prayer for unity is encouraged, but common worship is not to be used indiscriminately. There are two main principles governing common worship: bearing witness to the unity of the church; sharing in the means of grace. “Witness to the unity of the church generally forbids common worship, but the grace to be had from it sometimes commends this practice. The course to be adopted is to be decided by local episcopal authority, unless otherwise determined by the bishops’ conferences.” |
| #9, 10, 11 | Dialogue helps everyone understand their own church better as well as the other partner’s. Seminary theology should be taught from a wholesome attitude, not based strictly in controversy. Dialogue should not lead to a false irenicism that diminishes or changes one’s own beliefs. |
| #12 | Ecumenism can promote the social common good when people of many faith communions work together. |

### Chapter III Separated Churches and Ecclesial Communities

| #13 | There are two major types of division that affect the seamless robe of Christ: Eastern Orthodox churches and Western Reformation churches and ecclesial communions. |
| #14-15 | The Eastern Churches trace their origins back to the apostles. They also formed the religious and spiritual context for the early ecumenical councils and many of the Church Fathers. They maintain the notion of priesthood and apostolic succession, and the sacramental system. Their liturgy appreciates an intimate “partaking in the divine nature.” Some worship in common is not merely possible, but encouraged. |
| #16 | These churches have their distinct governance and disciplines. |
| #17 | There is legitimate difference in theological expression of doctrine. At different times, one or another church may more clearly come to a fuller appreciation of the mystery of revelation. In these cases, it is often better to consider different expressions as mutually complementary rather than conflicting. It naturally happens that individuals or small groups may decide to come into full communion with the Catholic Church. [There is no recognition here that instances of this “conversion” often cause considerable heartache among those who maintain fidelity to the Orthodox church.] |
| #18 | We should not impose any burden beyond what is essential to implement and maintain unity and communion. The council hopes that the barrier dividing the church between east and west will be removed, so that there may be one dwelling, with Christ as cornerstone, who will make both one. |
| #19 | There are also churches and ecclesial communions that came to be separated at the end of the Middle Ages that have historical connections to the Catholic Church, but (more so than with the Eastern churches) they differ considerably from the Catholic church as well as among one another. |
| #20 | Many of these Christians make open confession to Jesus Christ as the one mediator between God and human beings, to the glory of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their longing for union with Christ inspires them to seek an ever closer unity. |
| #21 | Love and reverence “almost a cult” for holy scripture leads these brothers and sisters to study and pray over the sacred text. But they have different opinions about the relationship between the Bible and the Church. |
| #22 | Whenever baptism is duly administered, that person is truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, and reborn to a sharing in divine life. Thus baptism establishes a sacramental bond of unity among all who have been reborn in it. But by itself, baptism is only the beginning, that awaits a fulfillment. Although many of these ecclesial communities have not retained the authentic and full reality of the Eucharistic mystery, their commemoration of the death and resurrection in the Lord’s Supper signifies a life in communion with Christ. |
| #23 | These communities do not always have an identically similar interpretation of the moral application of the gospel, but they share with us a desire to stand by the word of Christ as the source of Christian virtue. |
| #24 | The council exhorts the faithful to engage in ecumenical dialogue, but warns against superficiality, and also all importunate zeal, both of which would hinder real progress towards unity. |

What is the impact of this document on the Catholic experience today?