

LESSON 60: CHRISTIANS OUTSIDE THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (PART 1)

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned about the relationship of the Church with unbaptised people who are adherents of other religions or who do not believe in God. In this lesson and the next, we will learn about Christians who are baptised and who believe in Christ, but who are not members of the Catholic Church.

Current lesson:

1. It has often been asked, if the Church founded by Jesus Christ was One, why is there today such a vast collection of Christians claiming to be a part of the Body of Christ, and yet not being in full unity with one another? And who are these other groups of Christians anyway?
2. Over the centuries, various events have taken place in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church which have caused multiple schisms (i.e. splits) to take place.

Unitatis Redintegratio, 3: “Even in the beginnings of this one and only Church of God there arose certain rifts, which the Apostles strongly condemned. But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions made their appearance and quite large communities came to be separated from full communion with the Catholic Church – for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame.”

3. The state of the Body of Christ today is very reflective of three major disputes and the consequent schisms that took place in the history of Christianity.

On the one hand, we have the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, we have the cluster of Eastern Churches, which are themselves also generally divided into the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, both not being in full communion with each other. Beyond that, there is also a very significant cluster of Christian communities called the Protestants comprising over 40,000 denominations globally. (*Note:* The term “denomination” strictly applies to Protestant groups, not to the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Churches.)

Together, all these Christians form about 2.2 billion people, a third of the world population. Unfortunately, they do not all exist in a state of full unity.

SCHISM ONE: THE CHALCEDONIAN DISPUTE

4. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, the Council drafted the Chalcedonian formulation to address the various rampant heresies about Jesus: “acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”. At the same time, the Council also acknowledged that even though the accurate position on Christ’s natures was

that he possessed two natures, it would not emphasise the unity of the two natures, since there was no single interpretation for how the two natures related to each other.

This position of the Council was cause for serious concern on the part of the Eastern Church that is today known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches, as they had a particular emphasis on the *unity* of Christ's two natures. Pope Dioscorus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, therefore refused to accept the formulation promulgated by the Council of Chalcedon.

An official separation took place between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the rest of the Church since 451 AD, which lasts even until this day. They are also known as non-Chalcedonian Churches. They recognise only the first three Ecumenical Councils. Oriental Orthodox Churches are most present in Armenia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan, Syria, and Kerala (India).

5. In recent times, members of the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches have come to a clear understanding that both sides have always loyally maintained the same authentic faith in Christ even though they may have used the related theological terms in different ways. But despite this theological recognition and reconciliation, juridical reconciliation is a big challenge as territorial issues are complicated.
6. In Malaysia, the most established Oriental Orthodox Christian community is the Orthodox Syrian Church (originating from Kerala, India) that has been present in the country since 1928. About 200 families from Malayalee ethnicity worship at the Cathedral of Saint Mary the Theotokos in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur.

There is also the Coptic Orthodox Church in Melaka, St Mary & St Mark Coptic Orthodox Church. It is a part of the (Oriental Orthodox) Diocese of Sydney.

SCHISM TWO: THE FILIOQUE DISPUTE

7. One of the most significant events in the early history of the Church was agreement throughout the Roman Empire, both East and West, on the Nicene Creed (i.e. the "I believe"). It was intended to bring doctrinal stability to the Church. However, over time, a disagreement arose over the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed (an addition to the part of the text which referred to the Holy Spirit "proceeding from the Father"). The Western Church had subsequently added the *filioque* phrase (Latin, "and from the Son") to the Creed.
8. The Western Church of course had a reasoned explanation for this addition. For the Eastern Church, however, the *filioque* was theologically unacceptable. Theological though this argument may have been, the consequent split between the Eastern Church and the Western Church was tainted by many political factors and rivalry for dominance. The Patriarchs of the East had given the title "Ecumenical Patriarch" to Constantinople, replacing the role of the Pope in Rome.

9. In 1054 AD, a mutual excommunication took place between East and West when the East refused to concede to the Catholic claim to be the universal Mother Church. In 1965, the Western Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople had both nullified the mutual condemnations of 1054 AD. But healing and communion after over 900 years of mutual discord requires much more than mere retraction of past condemnations.

10. The Eastern Churches that broke away from the Universal Catholic Church in 1054 AD are known as Eastern Orthodox Churches. They recognise the first seven Ecumenical Councils of the Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches are present in many parts of the world, but the biggest Eastern Orthodox population is found in Russia (about 150 million members, which is almost half of the worldwide Eastern Orthodox population).

Note: There are 23 Eastern Churches (grouped into at least six different rites) that either did not follow in the schism of 1054 AD and remained in full communion with Rome or have since returned to full communion with Rome, meaning that they recognise the supremacy of the papal office. These are called Eastern Catholic Churches and are equally a part of the Universal Catholic Church.

11. There is a Russian Orthodox congregation that worships in Kuala Lumpur in their recently established Archangel Michael Orthodox Church.

12. *Dominus Iesus*, 17: “...there exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. The Churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by **apostolic succession** and a **valid Eucharist**, are **true particular Churches**. Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they **lack full communion** with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy, which, according to the will of God, the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire Church.”

13. Some important excerpts from the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1993) regarding our relationship with Eastern Christians:

Point 122 (on sacraments and liturgy): Between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches not in full communion with it, there is still a very close communion in matters of faith. Moreover, “through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature” and “although separated from us, these Churches still possess true sacraments, above all – by apostolic succession – the priesthood and the Eucharist...”. This offers ecclesiological and sacramental grounds, according to the understanding of the Catholic Church, for allowing and even encouraging some sharing in liturgical worship, even of the Eucharist, with these Churches, “given suitable circumstances and the approval of church authorities”. It is recognized, however, that Eastern Churches, on the basis of their own ecclesiological understanding, may have more restrictive disciplines in this matter, which others should respect. Pastors should carefully instruct the faithful so that they will be clearly aware of the proper reasons for

this kind of sharing in liturgical worship and of the variety of discipline which may exist in this connection.

Point 123: Whenever necessity requires or a genuine spiritual advantage suggests, and provided that the danger of error or indifferentism is avoided, it is lawful for any Catholic for whom it is physically or morally impossible to approach a Catholic minister, to receive the sacraments of penance, Eucharist and anointing of the sick from a minister of an Eastern Church.

Point 124: Since practice differs between Catholics and Eastern Christians in the matter of frequent communion, confession before communion and the Eucharistic fast, care must be taken to avoid scandal and suspicion among Eastern Christians through Catholics not following the Eastern usage. A Catholic who legitimately wishes to communicate with Eastern Christians must respect the Eastern discipline as much as possible and refrain from communicating if that Church restricts sacramental communion to its own members to the exclusion of others.

Point 125: Catholic ministers may lawfully administer the sacraments of penance, Eucharist and the anointing of the sick to members of the Eastern Churches, who ask for these sacraments of their own free will and are properly disposed.

In these particular cases also, due consideration should be given to the discipline of the Eastern Churches for their own faithful and any suggestion of proselytism should be avoided.

Point 126 (on liturgical participation): Catholics may read lessons at a sacramental liturgical celebration in the Eastern Churches if they are invited to do so. An Eastern Christian may be invited to read the lessons at similar services in Catholic churches.

Point 127 (on celebration of marriage): A Catholic minister may be present and take part in the celebration of a marriage being properly celebrated between Eastern Christians or between a Catholic and an Eastern Christian in the Eastern church, if invited to do so by the Eastern Church authority and if it is in accord with the norms given below concerning mixed marriages, where they apply.

Point 128: A member of an Eastern Church may act as bridesmaid or best man at a wedding in a Catholic church; a Catholic also may be bridesmaid or best man at a marriage properly celebrated in an Eastern church. In all cases this practice must conform to the general discipline of both Churches regarding the requirements for participating in such marriages.



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