

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Breathing with Both Lungs

I think it's fair to say that many, if not most, Latin deacons are woefully ignorant of their Eastern Catholic brothers. Much of this unfamiliarity is understandable as we rarely cross paths, and even when we do, it's often in passing. This, coupled with the fact that they consist of 23 self-governing churches in communion with Rome, confuses many Latin deacons leading some, rather erroneously, to identify Eastern Catholics with their Orthodox equivalent.

In his 1995 encyclical, *Ut unum sint*, St. John Paul II describes the unity of the Church saying, “. . . the Church must breathe with her two lungs!” Here, he speaks of the mutual interdependence and healthy tension that should exist between the East and West so that the Church, as a whole, can fully benefit and her mission becomes more effective.

Last fall, I had the privilege of participating in the first-ever Eastern Catholic Deacon Conference held in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Sponsored by the Eastern Catholic Association, the gathering was comprised of permanent deacons, their wives, candidates, minor clergy, deacon directors and protodeacons across the United States. The event was hosted by the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic represented by Bishop Kurt Burnette.

The program schedule for the four-day event was packed with speakers from various Eastern Churches along with a couple of Latin contributors. The various styles of clerical dress among the participants reflected the rich cultural and traditional diversity that is the Catholic Church. Such a diversity would suggest, at least implicitly, that many of the talks would be somewhat new to a Latin deacon. While there was some truth to this in terms of expression, the substance was quite familiar as it was all profoundly Catholic. I found myself a Western fish in an Eastern pond that was, at its core, the same as my pond – or better – a different part of the same pond.

The unified diversity found within the Catholic Church is unparalleled in the world and in human history. Not only is this diversity expressed in the various liturgical rites and revealed within the many ecclesial traditions, they proclaim and celebrate the same truth, the same faith and, in the end, the very same God.

I first became aware of the Eastern Churches while taking an undergraduate course in liturgy, part of which required a participation in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy. The professor, a Dominican whom I have great respect, in preparing us for the visit, said, “They (the Byzantines) are as Catholic as we are.” Then, with a wink and a smile, he quipped, “Perhaps more so.” In that phrase, one that has stuck with me over the years, I began to recognize that it is possible to have a unity of faith while at the same time a diversity of expression. Indeed, without this

diversity, the mystery of salvation remains obscure as no one expression can come close to exhausting the reality.

Nowhere is this diversity more beautifully expressed than in our worship. Whether it's one of the Latin or the many Eastern rites, these liturgical expressions all reveal the same reality, allow for participation in the same Paschal Mystery, and enable us to share in the same Real Presence. This diversity enables the Church to focus on different aspects of our faith creating a healthy tension so that Catholicism cannot be reduced to one of its many Churches, even if that Church is dominant in a particular region of the world. Only together, like the voices of a well-trained choir, do they come together to create a beautiful harmony that alone they cannot.

Because this complementarity exists within the Church for the good of the Church, it should likewise be reflected in her many parts, including the diaconate. Recognizing this, it was important in rebooting *Deacon Digest*, that the publication always have an Eastern influence. To ensure this impact in every edition, I established a regular column called, "Light from the East," taken from St. John Paul II's 1995 apostolic letter by the same name. With regular contributors like Fr. Deacon Daniel Dozier, Fr. Deacon Basil Balke and others, it is hoped that the restored diaconate too can breathe with both lungs. This will enable the Church to benefit from her own richness and allow her mission to become more effective.

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