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BASIL H. LOSTEN

On Orientale Lumen

On 2 May 1995, Pope John Paul II promulgated the Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen* (*OL*), the "Light of the East," on the occasion of the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's Apostolic Letter *Orientalium Dignitas*. Just three weeks later, on the Feast of the Ascension, the Holy Father promulgated the Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, subtitled "On Commitment to Ecumenism." Today I should like to offer some thoughts on the significance of John Paul II's letter *Orientale Lumen* both for the Catholic Church and for the ecumenical movement.

First, let me state what *Orientale Lumen* is not. This letter is emphatically *not* addressed "to" the Eastern Churches. *Orientale Lumen* is an Apostolic Letter addressed to the entire Catholic Church, "to the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful," about the universal importance of the Eastern Churches, and about certain specific values which the Holy Father wants everyone to appreciate as these values are seen through the prism or the perspective of the Eastern Churches. The Holy Father wants the entire Church to reflect upon this Apostolic Letter with great seriousness.

With some exceptions, that has not been happening. Since *Orientale Lumen* is written about the Eastern Churches, there seems to be a wide-spread mistaken assumption that nobody else needs to be interested or even to read the document. This neglect itself threatens the whole ecumenical process. From what appears to be massive disinterest in *Orientale Lumen* among Roman Catholics, Eastern Catholics (to say nothing of Eastern Orthodox) are apt to conclude that we are seen more as museum pieces than as living, vibrant particular Churches with serious contributions to make.

Orientale Lumen is firmly situated in the context of the

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ecclesiology of *Sister Churches*. Not so long ago, Catholics seemed to believe that the Church of Rome was the "mother and mistress" of all Christians, that everyone had to learn everything from Rome, and that Rome did not need to learn anything from anyone — indeed, that Rome could not learn anything from anyone. Today that sounds like a caricature, but this attitude was quite real, and very damaging.

An ecclesiology of *Sister Churches* causes us to understand that the relationship among the particular Churches that make up the Catholic communion is a relationship of radical equality — what the canon lawyers call the *æqualis dignitas* — with a constant exchange of gifts. In the Catholic communion we enrich one another by sharing the graces which Almighty God has given us. There are very many examples of how the spiritual gifts of the West have enriched the Eastern Churches and continue to do so. As a Ukrainian Catholic Bishop in the twentieth century, I cannot find words to express my gratitude for all that the Roman Church has done for my own Ukrainian Catholic Church: the publication of magnificent liturgical books, the promotion of theological education, the reorganization of the Church in the emigration when the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe made it impossible for the Church to function openly in her historic homeland, and above all the untiring efforts of the Holy Father to obtain the restoration of religious freedom for our Churches in the old Soviet Union, in Romania, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Now in *Oriente Lumen* the Holy Father is reminding the Western Church that in addition to giving aid and support to the Eastern Churches, the Western Church must also receive aid and support from the Eastern Churches (for that matter, the Holy Father is reminding the Christian East that we must share what we have, not just keep it all for ourselves). This exchange of gifts among the Sister Churches is never-ending and inexhaustible, just as the grace of God is never-ending and inexhaustible.

Two major themes of *Oriente Lumen* are liturgical worship and monasticism. The Holy Father is not suggesting either that the Church should confine her activity exclusively to liturgical celebration, or that all Catholics should drop everything else and rush to join monasteries. But the Holy Father is definitely teaching us in this document that, as Vatican II puts it, the liturgy is the summit of the Church's activity, and the source from which all her power flows. Pope John Paul II even

defines creation as "a complex whole which finds its perfection, its purpose, in the liturgy alone" (*OL* 11). The Holy Father is teaching us that monasticism, authentic monastic life in accordance with the traditions which go back to the very beginnings of Christian monasticism in Egypt and the Holy Land and which developed in Byzantium, is always an essential witness for the entire Church. The monastics are to be an example, an inspiration to all of us; they are not religious eccentrics who go off somewhere out of sight and pray and meditate while the rest of us get on with the "real" life of the Church.

As I read *Orientale Lumen*, I was struck by a remark that Cardinal Ratzinger has frequently made: liturgy and monasticism are the two most important "carriers" of orthodox Catholic theology. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, in the words of a well-known axiom. In *Orientale Lumen*, Pope John Paul II is diplomatically and courteously inviting the Western Church to reflect again on the liturgical situation, in the light of the continuing liturgical tradition of the Christian East. This does not mean that the Western Church should adopt Eastern liturgical forms holus-bolus; the West has its own liturgical tradition. But the Christian East can very appropriately be a test of recent liturgical developments, a measuring tool for comparison and for consideration whether, and how, the liturgical situation of the West might need further consideration.

Pope John Paul II reminds us that "the cry of men and women today seeking meaning for their lives reaches all the Churches of the East and of the West. In this cry, we perceive the invocation of those who seek the Father whom they have forgotten and lost (cf. Lk 15:18-20; Jn 14:8)" (*OL* 4). This is the tragedy of so much of the Christian world: so many Christians have forgotten and lost the Father.

We are all painfully aware of the crisis in Western countries, and we are also aware, simultaneously, of the massive spiritual thirst of the populations of these countries, which is leading people (under the entirely mistaken illusion that Christianity has nothing to offer) to wildly aberrant interests in paganism, oriental religions, and even Satanism. Not only are the Western countries in terrible spiritual danger from this situation: because of the economic superiority of much of the West, this spiritual disaster is threatening the whole human race. The shocking statistics on the increase of suicides among American young people are only one indication of this spiritual

tragedy. As the Holy Father teaches, "if the Cross of Christ is emptied of its power, man no longer has roots, he no longer has prospects, he is destroyed."

This spiritual calamity is a diabolic lie, a deception. The Christian, Catholic Faith is the unique way to God, One in the Holy Trinity. The Christian goal "is participation in the divine nature through communion with the mystery of the Holy Trinity" (*OL* 6). In the Church, the Holy Spirit prays within us, leading us back to the Father through the Son. Even apart from the Holy Bible itself, the treasures of our Christian spirituality fill libraries; there are hundreds of volumes already available in English and there is plenty more where that came from, waiting to be translated.

It is for the monastics to lead us in drinking deeply of this well, this source of our spiritual life. It is for authentic monasticism to be at the heart of our dioceses, our parishes, of every aspect of the Church's life. In this materialistic age that values "practicality" above everything else, it is for the monastics to teach us by their example that happiness does not come from material abundance, that the "practicality" of this world only makes us fools in the light of Christ, the light of the Gospel, the light of eternity. From the Christian understanding, the monastics are much more practical than anyone else.

An important element in the spiritual crisis of today is the loss of historical awareness. We have become dangerously estranged from tradition. As the Pope writes: "Today we often feel ourselves prisoners of the present. It is as though man had lost his perception of belonging to a history which precedes him and follows him" (*OL* 8). In a period of dizzying technological, political, and economic change far too many people have become disoriented, without roots or mooring, trapped in a present which is felt to be out of control, between a past which seems to have lost its meaning and an absurd future. People feel manipulated by forces beyond their understanding. Contemporary man is sick, deathly sick, and is waiting for the unique Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore the Pope teaches us:

Going beyond our own frailties, we must turn to [Jesus Christ], the one Teacher, sharing in His death so as to purify ourselves from that jealous attachment to feelings and memories, not of the great things God

has done for us, but of the human affairs of a past that still weighs heavily on our hearts. May the Spirit clarify our gaze so that together we may reach out to contemporary man who is waiting for the good news. If we make a *harmonious*, illuminating, life-giving *response* to the world's expectations and sufferings, we will truly contribute to a more effective proclamation of the Gospel among the people of our time. (*OL* 4)

For this to happen we must ``situate ourselves between the past and the future, with a grateful heart for the benefits received and for [the benefits] expected, . . . with a clear-cut sense of continuity which takes the name of Tradition and of eschatological expectation" (*OL* 8). Tradition seems to have become unpopular in the Christian West, which gives the impression of having fallen victim to a never-ending quest for novelty while losing sight of the Eternal God Who proclaims ``Behold, I make all things new!" (Apoc 21:5).

Pope John Paul II defines Tradition as

the living memory of the Risen One met and witnessed to by the Apostles, who passed on His living memory to their successors in an uninterrupted line, guaranteed by the apostolic succession through the laying on of hands, down to the Bishops of today. . . . [Tradition] is not an unchanging repetition of formulas, but a heritage which preserves its original, living kerygmatic core. Tradition preserves the Church from the danger of gathering only changing opinions, and guarantees her certitude and continuity.

[Tradition is] a living reality which grows and develops, and which the Spirit guarantees precisely because it has something to say to the people of every age. As Scripture is increasingly understood by those who read it,² every other element of the Church's living heritage is increasingly understood by believers and is enriched by new contributions, *in fidelity and in continuity*.³

[Tradition is] the living memory of the Bride, kept eternally youthful by the Love that dwells within her. (OL 8)

Tradition gives us the power to live our Christian lives and the power to witness to the Gospel effectively.

We must show people the beauty of memory, the power that comes to us from the Spirit and makes us witnesses because *we are children of witnesses*: we must make [people] taste the wonderful things the Spirit has wrought in history; we must show that it is precisely Tradition which has preserved [people], thus giving hope to those who, even without seeing their efforts to do good crowned by success, know that someone else will bring them to fulfillment; therefore man will feel less alone, less enclosed in the narrow corner of his own individual achievement. (OL 8)

This phrase "the beauty of memory" caught my attention at once. Almost throughout our century, there has been a terrible attack on the very idea of beauty, and an increasingly bold cult of ugliness. This has been reflected even in the Church, in a wave of iconoclasm that is almost unprecedented. This attack on beauty is an attack on humanity, an effort to diminish the human person and reduce the human person to something worse than the beasts. So we may be thankful to the Holy Father for reminding us that

liturgical prayer in the East shows a great aptitude for involving the human person in his or her totality; the mystery is sung in the loftiness of its content, but also in the warmth of the sentiments it awakens in the heart of redeemed humanity. In the sacred act, even bodiliness is summoned to praise, and beauty . . . expressing the divine harmony and the model of humanity transfigured,⁴ appears everywhere: in the shape of the church, in the sounds, in the colors, in the lights, in the scents. (OL 11)

This stress on beauty as an image of God and an essential path to God is of crucial importance for our preaching of the Gospel. The modern cult of ugliness is part and parcel with the demonic deceit that tries to convince mankind that life is absurd. The cult of ugliness ultimately leads to suicide and destruction. Frequently Christianity has been falsely accused of rejecting creation, rejecting matter, and of seeking to deprive people of happiness. In our time that false accusation is at its most ironic. As the Pope teaches us, in the divine worship of authentic Christianity, we find "a balanced and marvelous teaching on the dignity, respect, and purpose of creation and of the human body in particular" (*OL* 11). Far from rejecting the goodness of the material creation in general and humanity in particular, the liturgy leads us to the transfiguration of the body, and to the revelation of created things as the good gifts of the Creator to mankind.

Any number of satirists have noticed one of the great ironies of contemporary society: people have an increasingly long life expectancy and an ever-increasing number of labor-saving and time-saving devices — but never in the history of the human race have people been in such a hurry, and never has the human attention span been so slender. This can be amusing, but it is also an attack upon humanity, and it creates grave pastoral problems for the Church. Any authentic, mature human person needs to take time to think, to reflect, to pray, to be something more than a prisoner of the present moment. The constant rush and the bombardment of noise come close to making real thought impossible. As the Pope says,

[man today] is often unable to be silent for fear of meeting himself, of feeling the emptiness that asks itself about meaning; man who deafens himself with noise. All, believers and non-believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how He wishes, and allows us to understand His words.
(*OL* 16)

The Christian Gospel cannot be reduced to sound bites, and the worship of God cannot be confined to the time available between TV commercials. The Word of God and the liturgy require a serious

commitment of time and attention, a commitment that our society has largely forgotten. Many people do not realize that "time belongs to God" (OL 8). With reference to the liturgy, the Pope teaches that:

The lengthy duration of the celebrations, the repeated invocations, everything expresses gradual identification with the mystery celebrated with one's whole person. Thus the prayer of the Church already becomes participation in the heavenly liturgy, an anticipation of the final beatitude. (OL 11)

References to a "lengthy duration" and a "gradual" process are difficult for many people today, who want quick, easy answers to hard questions. We cannot hope to bring this difficult Gospel to other people until and unless we have made it our own "through the prayerful assimilation of Scripture and the liturgy" (OL 16). This is what the Saints mean when they exhort us "save yourself, and thousands around you will be saved." The living witness of someone who has genuinely made the life of Scripture and the liturgy his own will awaken in others the thirst for God and bring them to the same living, unfailing Source of life. This has never been more true than it is today. We are bringing the Good News of salvation, the Good News that God loves us and gives eternal meaning to each of us. To bring that message convincingly, we must believe it ourselves; we must know the love of God from our own experience.

Oriente Lumen and *Ut Unum Sint* go together; the two documents constitute a moral unity. The two documents complement one another in expressing the ecumenical vision of the Catholic Church and in expounding what the Second Vatican Council terms "the special position of the Eastern Churches" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). All Christians, everywhere, have a natural interest in knowing and understanding how the Catholic Church views the ecumenical situation, and how the Catholic Church proposes to make progress on the path to Christian Unity. All Catholics have not merely an interest but a duty to understand and apply the teaching of the Church on the work of ecumenism, which, as the Pope teaches in these same documents, is an obligation binding upon all of us.

When the two documents appeared, in May and June 1995, one

could even notice some overt grumbling against the Holy Father paying so much attention to the Christian East, and expressions of the desire that instead the Pope should concentrate more on achieving better relations with the Anglicans and the Protestants. Could any criticism be more short-sighted? The eventual reconciliation of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church will do more than any other ecumenical development could possibly do to encourage the reconciliation between the Catholic Church and Protestant communities.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has stressed his commitment to Catholic ecumenism and his special longing for an end to the schism between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This commitment, this longing, are firmly in accord with the consistent teaching of the Holy See and the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. It behooves us to follow this teaching, to put into practice the program the Holy Father has given us. To that end, my first wish for *Oriente Lumen* is, simply, that every Latin Catholic bishop, priest, deacon, monastic, seminarian, and lay person would read it carefully and attentively, noting how it can be applied in everyone's particular circumstances. I hope that you have already read *Oriente Lumen* carefully, and that in the discussion we may touch on various aspects of the document in greater detail.

What does Pope John Paul II ask of the Western Church? The Holy Father reminds everyone that all Catholics must be fully acquainted with the tradition of the Christian East, be nourished by that tradition, and thus encourage the process of Christian unity (*OL* 1). At the end of the Apostolic Letter, the Holy Father returns to this theme, first exhorting all Christians to a constant, shared conversion, and then noting that

conversion is also required of the Latin Church, that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of Eastern Christians, and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Eastern Churches are the bearers, to the benefit of the entire Catholic communion;³ that she may show concretely, far more than in the past, how much she esteems and admires the Christian East and how essential she considers its

contribution to the full realization of the Church's universality. (OL 21)

The Holy Father has two specific goals in mind with *Oriente Lumen*: Pope John Paul II wishes to remind all Catholics of these values which he invites us to view through the prism of the Christian East, and he wishes, most strenuously, to promote the restoration of full Eucharistic communion between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Pope sets forth some particular ways in which we should work to promote this unity, especially in places where the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church live in the same territory, as in most of the United States, for example.

The ecumenical relationship between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church is often frustrating; we are so close to each other, and yet it is so difficult to communicate with one another on a basis of mutual understanding. Those of us who remember the Second Vatican Council, and the remarkable heightening of Catholic awareness of Eastern Orthodoxy as our Sister Church, and who have followed eagerly the progress of the dialogue of love and the International Theological Dialogue, are often tempted to feel that the process of reconciliation has stalled.

Often people are tempted to blame this frustrating slow-down on the consequences of the political changes in Eastern Europe which began about ten years ago and are still unfolding. These political changes have certainly had a drastic effect upon the Churches. But there is another factor, which may be more encouraging if we take it into account (I owe this insight to Edward Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity): as we come closer to the goal of complete unity, it is to be expected that the road becomes more difficult.

When mountain-climbers begin their ascent, the path is usually easy; very few mountains go straight up from sea level. But the closer the mountaineers come to the top of the mountain, the steeper the slope is, the higher and more dangerous the cliffs are, the thinner the atmosphere becomes. Muscles are tired, the climbers are weary, and naturally the last part of the climb, to reach the peak, becomes by far the hardest. How could it be otherwise?

By the same token, when the peak or summit of an ecumenical

relationship seems to be attainable, fears are stimulated. The Christian East, let me say bluntly, has serious historic fears of Roman Catholicism arising from the memory of real events. Today, the Christian East often perceives Roman Catholicism as a much larger, more powerful Church that seeks only to swallow up the Christian East. Ecumenical dialogue was difficult enough in the days thirty years ago, when it was only a matter of exchanging courteous letters and making warm gestures of friendship, although even then there were Orthodox voices raised in protest. Now, when the work of the International Theological Dialogue has demonstrated that the theological differences really are capable of resolution, when the Pope has stated solemnly and publicly that he is quite willing for the Orthodox to participate fully in the determination of how the Roman Primacy should be exercised (*Ut Unum Sint* 95, 96), and it has become clear that the restoration of full Eucharistic communion between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church is an attainable goal, naturally those who do not want that goal are seeking almost frantically to find any and every possible obstacle to stop the ecumenical process dead in its tracks.

This is the moment of testing of our commitment to that reconciliation that the Holy Father wants and that the Catholic Church wants. Can we develop the patience and the love to finish the climb, step by step? Or will we succumb to the temptation to give up and turn back? My questions are not at all rhetorical. Many Catholic ecumenists are impatient with the Orthodox. Many Catholic ecumenists would much rather place greater emphasis on dialogue with the Protestants, thinking that the Christian East is "irrelevant" and of little or no importance to Latin Catholics. In *Orientale Lumen* Pope John Paul has firmly refuted that view. We must persevere in the reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, trusting prayerfully that God will not abandon us.

Will we reach that goal (which, again, is an attainable goal) by the year two thousand? Obviously I don't know the answer to that question, and neither does anyone else. But had anyone told me in 1985 that within five years I would see with my own eyes the fall of the Berlin Wall, the restoration of religious freedom in the Soviet Union, the collapse of Communism, and all the rest, I would have burst out laughing. I have nothing against dreamers, but that would have seemed

sheer fantasy. We all know what happened. God moves in His own good time; when the time came, God moved with stunning rapidity.

I have the strong spiritual suspicion that when the reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church is actually brought about, in response to our prayer and sacrifice, this reconciliation will come with breath-taking speed, surprising all of us. A good number of people who are more advanced in prayer than I am have said that to me, and I am inclined to believe it. Meanwhile, now that the goal is in sight we must not allow anything to cause us to turn back.

Notes

¹John Paul II, "Address after the Way of the Cross, Good Friday (1 April 1994)," 3, *AAS* 87 (1995), 88; cited in *OL* 3.

²"Divina eloquia cum legente crescunt," Saint Gregory the Great, "In Ezekiel," I, VII, 8: *PL* 76, 843.

³Cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 8.

⁴Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *The Pedagogue*, III, 1, 1: *Sch* 158, 12.

⁵Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* 17; John Paul II, "Address to the Extraordinary Consistory," (13 June 1994): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13-14 June 1994, p. 5.