

ORIENTALIUM ECCLESiarUM: SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL DECREE ON THE EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES – A HISTORICAL SURVEY

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Abstract

The main focus of the article is the historical background of the evolution of the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches of the Second Vatican Council. Although criticisms have been raised against the Decree, it is a landmark in the relationship between the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and the Roman Catholic Church. This Decree reminds the Roman Catholic Church of the communion nature of the Church and the equal right, dignity and obligation of the individual churches in the communion. This Decree exhorts the Eastern Catholic Churches to be aware of their individuality and to be faithful their identity. This Decree is a great boost to those who are engaged in ecumenism as it makes special efforts to underline the richness of the Eastern Churches. Although many questioned the need for a separate Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, the determined efforts of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI and cardinals Augustine Bea and Jan Willebrands made this Decree a reality. The efforts of delatinisation which were initiated and implemented in the light of this Decree, bear ample fruits in the Eastern Catholic Churches.

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Introduction

The Second Vatican Council was an attempt on the part of Pope John XXIII to bring the Catholic Church out of immobility and to bring the Christian Churches together to give a collective Christian witness to the fragmented world. Deep sense of history and wider knowledge of historical events, keen and alert sensitivity to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, wide world experience and deep-rooted spirituality made the Pope convoke a Council aiming to have an outward looking Church with an ecumenical perspective. The Pope already had long years of assignments and diplomatic missions in Bulgaria, Turkey, France and Germany, which brought him into contact with Orthodox and non-Catholic Christians and different types of political groupings. "As a Pope, he manifested a determination to guide his Church toward reconsideration of its patterns and of faith and life in view of the world's needs, and toward genuine ecumenical relations with other Christian Churches."¹ The long years of estrangement with the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and non-Catholic and the growth of the monolithic structure of the Roman Catholic Church culminated in the definition of the infallibility of the Pope by the First Vatican Council which made the Orthodox Churches to move farther away from the Roman Church. The aims of the Second Vatican Council also included a cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated Churches.

Historical Background

The image of the Church in the first millennium was quite different from that of the Church of the second millennium. The consultative character and the synodal nature of the early Church were beautifully expressed in the Jerusalem Council and in the following Councils and Synods, slowly exercised in the structure of Pentarchy. Roman centralisation, which culminated in the Gregorian Reformation (1073-1216) further alienated the Eastern Churches from the Roman Church. Till the Second Vatican Council the attitude of the Roman Church was one of Mother and Roman Church considered herself as Mother and Eastern Churches were children. Before the Second Vatican Council, the Eastern Catholic Churches were treated as minor Churches requiring a paternalistic care by the Latin Church. In India they were denied the right to undertake evangelization activities and pastoral care of their migrant brethren who were not in the so-called

¹Williston Walker, *A History of the Church*, Edinburgh: T&T, 1997, 697.

proper territory of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The expression Sister Churches was re-introduced in the Second Vatican Council which is one of the greatest contributions of the Council in the fields of ecumenism and ecclesiology. The expression Sister Churches is an expression to show the relationship between the particular individual churches, which gives wider and fuller meaning to the communion ecclesiology of the ancient Church. The basic principle of the primitive Church was the unity of faith and plurality of traditions, celebrations and spiritualities. The greatest achievement of the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* [OE]) is the return to the tradition of the first millennium. There is diversity of rites in the church communion, but on the basis of rite there is no superior or inferior Church and all Churches are equal in this respect, which is clearly taught in OE number 3.

Before the Council and even during the early days of the Council, no one was daring to use the term "Churches". Pope Benedict XV on May 1, 1917, founded a special Congregation for the Oriental Church separating it from the jurisdiction of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide. After the Second Vatican Council due to the ecclesiological and theological changes the name of this dicastery was changed to Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches, now it is known as the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. This change from singular to plural recognises the theological, canonical, ecclesiological, spiritual and liturgical aspects of the different individual Churches of the East.

Commission and the Council Document in Preparation

The Decree on the *Eastern Catholic Churches* underwent several changes before it attained its final shape. Under the leadership of Cardinal Tardini, the Secretary of State, Ante-Preparatory Commission, the first Commission in preparation for the Second Vatican Council, sought the opinion of the bishops and theological faculties all over the world regarding the topics to be dealt with in the Council. The Commission received responses from all over the world and the responses of the Oriental Catholic bishops were also encouraging, although they had a lot of external constraints. It is interesting to note that out of the Roman Congregations the only one which expressed opinion on Oriental Churches was the Congregation

for Oriental Church.² The Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and some other theological faculties took keen interest in the matter and concrete proposals were made. In the light of the opinions received, it was decided to have a separate Commission for the Oriental Churches. A Commission for the Eastern Churches was appointed by Pope John in the middle of 1960 to work out pertinent topics on the basis of the proposals mentioned above. There were altogether nine Commissions in preparation for the Council. Amleto Cardinal Cicognani, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Church, was the Chairman of the Commission for the Eastern Churches. Archimandrite P. Welykyj, Secretary of the same Congregation, from the Ukrainian Church, was the Secretary of the Commission. In the selection of the members of the Commission, Pope John XXIII was very keen on having representatives from the entire range of the "Oriental Churches" in communion with the Roman Church. The Commission consisted of 30 members, two-thirds were Orientals and the same number of them was consultants. The Germans and the French had one representative each in all Commissions except in the Commission for the Eastern Churches. This Commission started to function very late.

The evolution of the conciliar Commission on the Oriental Churches did not resemble that of any other commission during the 1962-63 inter-session. Its trajectory was not comparable to that of the commissions that tried to begin a second preparation in the first months of 1963 or to that of commissions whose renewal would not be able to get off the ground until after the second or third period of the Council, a late start that, generally speaking, could not take place until after the team directing the composition of the schemas in question was changed.³

It is true that during the months of the 1962–1963 inter-sessions no plenary meeting of the Commission was held and in this respect it shared the lot of the Commission on Bishops.⁴ The Commission on the Oriental Churches could not hold its plenary meeting until September 20, 1963, only eight days before the beginning of the Council's second period. The Secretary Welykyj had his own explanations which were unacceptable to many.

²Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches. Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. I, Vorgrimler Herbert, Gen. ed., Freiburg: Herder and Herder 1967, 307.

³Giuseppe Alberigo, Joseph A. Komonchak, ed., *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, Maryknoll: Orbis/Leuven: Peeters, 1997, 460.

⁴Giuseppe Alberigo, Joseph A. Komonchak, ed., *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 460.

The topics to be discussed in the Commission included changes of Rites, *Communicatio in Sacris*, reunion of the non-Catholic Orientals and revision of the Canon Law. The work was divided into seven sections and there were 56 plenary sessions and a schema of 52 paragraphs was prepared. Later, some portions of this schema were transferred to other Commissions and the size of the schema got reduced. Due to various reasons, reasons of distance and official commitments, the entire members of the Commission made only two common sessions outside the Council sessions. Thus the *periti* played a key role in the formulation of the document compared to other commissions. Added to this, it must be remembered that the interests of the Oriental Churches were divergent and thus agreement on decisive questions became very difficult. "Some of the unsatisfactory compromises and gaps of the Decrees are to be traced to this."⁵ It is also interesting to note that the Orientals could not reach a minimum of consensus among themselves on several issues during the discussion until the final vote.

With the opening of the Council on October 11, 1962 the Commission's work was handed over to the newly formed Council Commission. It had the number of 26 members in the beginning and later it was raised to 30. The former Chairman and Secretary continued their offices in the new Commission too. This Commission drafted a schema entitled, "*That All May Be One*," which was presented to the Council Fathers on December 1, 1962, "but was rejected and sent to a mixed Commission composed of members of the Theological Commission, the Commission for the Eastern Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity."⁶ Unfortunately this Commission did not get enough opportunities for a detailed discussion. The schema was highly criticised by the Council Fathers and it was almost certain that the text would be rejected. However, due to the timely interventions of Cardinals Bea and Cicognani, a resolution was passed by which it was decided to combine together the three drafts dealing with the unity of Christians with that of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and with the chapter in the Theological Commission's schema on the Church.⁷

Cicognani was trying to bring out the ecumenical character of the schema on the Oriental Churches and to keep the schema completely

⁵Cfr. Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, 308.

⁶Paul Mailleux, S.J., *Eastern Churches*, Abbott Walter M., SJ, Gen. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York, 1966, 371.

⁷Giuseppe Alberigo, *The History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 465.

under the control of the Oriental Commission. However, he met with considerable opposition. He was of the opinion that since the relations between the Orthodox and the Protestant groups are inherently different, the Oriental Commission may deal with the ecumenical relations with the Orthodox. This discussion took place in the presence of Pope John XXIII, who paid a surprise visit to the Council Commissions to encourage their work. The next day Cicognani made a surprising retraction and agreed to leave chapter III in the Decree on Ecumenism, "provided it dealt also with relations with the heirs of the Protestant Reformation."⁸ This turning of events must be most probably due to the timely intervention of the Pope. This decision of March 29, 1963 restored the schema on Ecumenism to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, which was viewed as a defeat for the Commission on the Oriental Churches. However, it was a victory for the true ecumenical spirit of the Council.

There was also an attempt to reduce the duration of the Council, for which purpose the schemas were shortened. During the course of the first session of the Council it became clear that the Council could not tackle the subjects worked out by the Preparatory Commission. So there was the abridgement of the schemata prepared by the Oriental Commission as directed by the Central Commission and it was done by the *periti*. The schema in question was not very clear to some of the bishops and some bishops who sent responses were for the confirmation of the privileges of the patriarchs and for a stop to the dangerous Latinization. The schema which was sent to the Council Fathers back in April–May 1963 and whose sending was approved by the Pope on April 22, 1963 comprised a first part "on the discipline of the Oriental Churches" (nos. 1-44) and a second " on the union of Oriental Christians" (nos. 45–54). There was a pouring of opinions, corrections, deletions and additions. In the light of these suggestions, efforts had been made to revise the schema. Maximos IV and Edelby had offered forty pages of amendments. Maximos IV rejected the use of the concept "particular Church" solely for the Orient, since the Latin church, too, was a "particular Church". He argued that it was unacceptable that number 9 of the schema already distributed would allow that the Orthodox who came over to Catholic unity could sometimes abandon their Oriental rite."⁹ Maximos IV also reiterated that the four great Eastern patriarchates

⁸Giuseppe Alberigo, *The History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 467.

⁹Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 470.

were not the creation of the Popes or of the councils or due to the privileges granted by the Popes, but had their roots in the apostolic age. Yet "in the Catholic Church the institution of the patriarchates is regarded by supporters of centralization as chief enemy."¹⁰ There was also a controversy over the status of the ancient patriarchates of the Churches united to Rome. Sharp criticism of the schema came also from bishops other than the members of the Commission. "The Maronite bishop Michael Doumith (Lebanon) would declare that the great hopes which the Oriental Churches had placed on the Council had vanished at a reading of the schema presented."¹¹ The experts in Rome and their role were also questioned by some of the Commission members.

There were about 400 proposals for improvement and were dealt with by the pertinent Commission. The Commission had a further special working week from March 10 to 16, 1964. Further abridgements were made and 54 articles were reduced to 29 and further improvements were made. "On 27 April 1964 it was sanctioned by the Pope and for submission to the Fathers and despatched to them."¹² In the first week of the third session new proposals were incorporated. "However, no new text was printed for the discussion which began in the aula on 15 October 1964, but only the alterations approved by the Commission were distributed to the Fathers on an additional sheet, a fact which rendered a general view difficult, thus causing some confusion in the interventions as well."¹³

Prior to the discussions in the Council aula, on October 15-20, 1964, the text underwent five modifications.

But from the outset and until the final vote, the activities of the Commission on the Oriental Churches were determined by the inability of the Orientals to reach a minimal consensus among themselves, a problem peculiar to this Commission. This fact did not limit the outstanding role that the bishops of the Oriental Churches united to Rome played in the Council generally, a role disproportionate to the smallness of their numbers and the modesty of their means.¹⁴

It is interesting to note the remarks made by Congar. He says that during the discussion which began on October 15 at midday, Cardinal Koenig observed that the schema was not sufficiently

¹⁰Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 471.

¹¹Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 472.

¹²Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, 309.

¹³Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, 309.

¹⁴Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 460-461.

ecumenical, not consistent and requested the revision of the text in a more ecumenical way.¹⁵ Thirty Fathers spoke on the schema. Thirteen Fathers expressed their views in writing. Bishop Sebastian Valloppilly, representing the Eastern Catholic Churches in India, made an intervention in which he pointed out the jurisdictional problems faced by the Eastern Catholic Churches in India. A special mention was made about this in the first four paragraphs of the *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches*, which were influenced by this intervention.

The interventions stretched from unconditional commendation to complete rejection. Interestingly, the Orientals themselves were divided in their comments. The Latin Fathers, who were the majority, “did not wish to reject for fear of creating the impression that they were not favourably disposed towards the Oriental Churches.”¹⁶ They started taking interest in the matters of the Orientals, especially in the context of wider ecumenism. Along with some Maronites the delegates of the Chaldean and Armenian Churches were less open to the major concerns of Vatican II and less sensitive to the requirements of the ecumenical movement.¹⁷

At the end of the discussion, on October 21 and 22, voting was done on the corrected schema. The majority supported and a few voted against. A few supported under certain conditions, corrections, etc. Altogether 240 corrections were suggested and to prepare the final text with needed corrections, five sub-commissions were appointed. In each sub-commission there were three members and to help them there were two *periti* in each sub-commission. With needed corrections the final text was submitted to the Commission, which did the final finishing touch. Finally the whole text was brought to the Council hall for the decision of the Council Fathers. On November 21, 1964 in the final voting the Decree was approved with 2110 votes while 39 fathers voted against the Decree. Pope Paul VI approved the Decree and declared it as the official Decree of the Council. Two months were given for the actual coming into force of the Decree.¹⁸

It is interesting to make a comparison between Vatican I and Vatican II. In the former, the Melkite Patriarch Gregory Yussef had

¹⁵Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2012, 628.

¹⁶Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, 309.

¹⁷Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 464.

¹⁸Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, 310.

met with an almost complete lack of understanding about the Eastern customs and practices and the very concept of individual churches. On the other hand, in the Second Vatican Council, the Orientals could exercise great influence. This was mainly due to the open attitudes of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI. Besides, one could experience the ecumenical openness of the Council Fathers. The Council Fathers began to realize that the Orientals were no longer simply a folkloric or outdated vestiges of the past; they had something to say to the Church. Among the prominent Orientals were Maximos IV Saigh, the great Patriarch of the Melkites. He “had a young heart and a sharp mind and quickly became one of the most heeded authorities in most of the important conciliar debates.”¹⁹

The major contribution of the Oriental Fathers was in the development of a new ecclesiology which is more faithful to the primitive Church. The discussions on the schema of the Eastern Catholic Churches indirectly helped the Council Fathers to become more and more aware of the ancient Church traditions and the patrimony of the Eastern Churches. The communion ecclesiology, which is one of the major contributions of the Second Vatican Council, is the result of this interaction between the Eastern Church Council Fathers and Western Church Council Fathers. The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches re-asserted the fact that the Catholic Church is not monolithic and it can embrace the cultures and traditions of the place where she is rooted or planted. The pluralistic ecclesiology, spirituality and traditions were duly recognised by the teaching authority of the Church. “The witness of their liturgical life, the contribution of a theology based on the patristic tradition, and their actual experience of the idea of the local Church were so many ‘stones’ with which to help build an image of the Church derived from the sources.”²⁰ However, it should be noted that the contributions made by the Orientals in the formulation of the Decree were not properly incorporated in the final text of the Decree. It is true that their influence is more reflected in other important conciliar texts too.

We also notice fluctuating divisions among the Orientals. “Among the key questions that were recurring causes of division among the Orientals, both in the Commission and in the hall, were, 1) the expression “local Churches”; 2) the obligation in principle to remain

¹⁹Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 461.

²⁰Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 461.

in one's original rite; 3) the promotion of the institution of patriarchates; and, 4) the problem of *communicatio in sacris* or shared worship."²¹ While the Orientals were divided, the Latins were helpless to decide which side to take. The divisions may be summarised due to the following reasons: Ecumenists found it too "Uniate"; Latinizers found it too "Byzantine"; Latins found it too "Oriental".²²

The Title

Originally the title was "Decree on the Eastern Churches". To avoid any doubt about the aim of the Decree, "Catholic" was added and thereby it is made clear that the primary concern of the Decree is to deal with the Eastern Churches which are in communion with Rome. It does not mean that other Churches which are not in communion with Rome are not the subject of interest of the Council. The Decree on Ecumenism deals with many of the issues related to the churches which are not in communion with Rome. Thus the Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches should be considered as a compliment to the Decree on Ecumenism.

The Decree has brought most valuable clarifications in several fields concerning the Catholic Eastern Churches. (1) It expresses unequivocally the position and the rights of the Eastern Communities in the Catholic Church and re-establishes privileges and customs which have been abolished in the past. (2) It clearly manifests the hope of the Council for a corporate reunion of the Eastern Churches presently not in union with the Church of Rome.²³

The Need of this Decree

There was a serious discussion on the need of a separate Decree on the Oriental Churches, which eventually may lead to the feeling among the church members that these Churches are special category of Churches. The opinion became very prominent that by incorporating the elements of the proposed Decree, especially the concept of the individual churches and the patriarchal structure, and thus to show that the subject dealt with are not of the interests of the Oriental Churches alone, but pertained to the primitive Church and the universal Church. Thus these concepts could be incorporated into

²¹Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 462–463.

²²Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. II, 463,

²³Paul Maillaux, SJ, *Eastern Churches*; Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 372.

the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Decree on the Bishop's Office. But these proposals came in an advanced stage of the preparation of the document and it would be very difficult to remould the document. Therefore, it was decided to go ahead with an independent Decree on the Oriental Churches.

His Beatitude Patriarch Maximos IV, Patriarch of Antioch for the Melkites, pointed out three reasons for the necessity of this special Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches. According to him it is necessary to resist the Latinization of Eastern Churches by the Roman Church by preservation of their patriarchal and synodal prerogatives; by restoration of their canonical discipline; by inter-ritual and inter-confessional collaboration with the separated brethren. Secondly, without a special Decree, existing Oriental legislation could not be removed, or its removal would be postponed indefinitely. Thirdly, this Decree will facilitate the erection of a special post-conciliar commission on an inter-ritual basis with the collaboration of the Oriental Catholics themselves or of friends of the Oriental rites.²⁴

Some Council Fathers were favourable to the draft text while others were for its rejection with the understanding that the important points treated in it would be inserted in other conciliar documents.

One objection to the decree was that since the council was preparing a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, a separate decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches would give the appearance that these churches were extraneous to the Catholic Church. Archbishop Bukatko, the Vice president of the Eastern Commission, defended the document by saying that the decree was not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of doctrinal and juridical issues relating to the Eastern churches. To abandon the document would be a loss of all its positive points. The Archbishop also reminded everyone that the project had been a personal initiative of the late Pope John XXIII; to set it aside would be a disregard of the late pope's wishes.²⁵

On the question whether or not there was to be a special Decree, one should remember that Pope John XXIII himself instituted the pertinent Commissions and entrusted the Commission members with working out the Decree. The repeated efforts in favour of greater consideration of Eastern ecclesiology in other Council texts, especially

²⁴M. Meletius Wojnar, "Decree on the Oriental Catholic Churches," *The Jurist* 25 (1965) 174.

²⁵John D. Faris, *Eastern Catholic Churches: Constitution and Governance*, New York: Saint Maron Publications, 1992, 75-76.

in the Constitution on the Church and in the Decree on the Bishop's Office, were after all not entirely fruitless.²⁶

There was an attempt to have a single Decree, combining two topics, Ecumenism and Eastern Churches. However, two Decrees were formulated, one on Ecumenism to promote better relationships between Churches and the other on Eastern Churches to improve the organization of the churches. The latter aims to develop a deeper and richer theology of the Churches clarifying the very concept of the Church and its nature and the universal mission entrusted to her. This Decree is the expression of the positive teachings of the Popes like Leo XIII, Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII who promoted and encouraged the preservation of the Oriental patrimony and traditions. Article 1 clearly speaks against the paternalistic attitude maintained by the Roman Church towards the Eastern Churches. The quality of Pope John XXIII for dialogue and his strong conviction of the values of dialogue played a key role in pushing through the Decree in spite of many adverse factors. The synodal responses of the Armenians, Syrians and the Melkites show that they wanted to maintain their distinctness and to be in closer relations with their separated brethren and they argued for a Document of the Council which highlighted the unique characteristics of the Eastern Churches.

The Text

The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches focuses on the Churches which are in communion with Rome. This Decree should be understood as complementary to the Decree on Ecumenism. Even before the beginning of the Council the Commission for Oriental Churches prepared a schema named *That They All May Be One*. On December 1, 1962 the schema was handed over to the Council Fathers. However, this schema was concentrating more on topics of Ecumenism and thus the schema was entrusted to the Secretariat for Christian Unity.

The Decree stressed the uniqueness of the Eastern Churches and their role in the universal Church. The Decree clarifies many points which shed light to the better understanding of the different *sui juris* churches and the freedom each church should have in the daily functioning.

There are 30 numbers in this Decree and they clearly speak about the various aspects of the Eastern Churches. The Decree begins with

²⁶Cfr. Johannes M. Hoeck, *Decree On Eastern Catholic Churches*, 312.

appreciating the unique traditions of the Oriental churches. These articles describe the general attitude of the Apostolic See of Rome towards the Eastern Churches. However, the first number is misleading as if the Oriental Catholic Churches are not Catholics. The second number speaks about the local churches or rites, which also needs further clarification and discussion. Numbers 3 and 4 speak of the different rites. Numbers 5 and 6 stress the importance of preserving the unique tradition of each church. Numbers 6 to 11 speak about the Oriental Patriarchs and 12 to 18 speak of the administration of the sacraments. Numbers 19 to 23 are on liturgy and 23 to 29 on the relationship of the Eastern Catholic churches with their non-Catholic counterparts. Number 30 is the concluding paragraph.

Some Observations on the Decree²⁷

The purpose of the Decree is to emphasize the position of the Catholic Church that the various Eastern Churches, though numerically small, are equal and integral parts of the Universal Church. It is also an attempt to remind the Eastern Churches to go back to their original tradition, if in the course of history they lost it. The dominant Latin Church in the course of time introduced many Latin customs and practices in the Eastern churches and the Decree makes an effort to go back to the pristine purity of the church traditions. The Council did not subscribe to the teaching of identifying the Church with the Roman Catholic Church.

Criticisms levelled against the Decree even by the members of the Commission who were in charge of the drafting of the Decree are the following:

The Decree does not correct the prejudices held in the Catholic Church in respect to the Eastern Churches. The Decree repeats unnecessarily many common places, already widely known in the Church. The Decree does not attempt to resolve true, and therefore, difficult, problems. The specific regulations, contained in the Decree, are mostly unsatisfactory.²⁸

The Decree is the first official declaration from the highest authority of the Church that the entire Catholic Church is proud of its integral component, the Eastern Churches. Article 3 clearly speaks about the right of each individual church in engaging mission activities. This article is specifically dealing with the problem in India

²⁷Cfr. Victor J. Pospishil, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum, Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches of the II Council of Vatican*, New York: Fordham University, 1965.

²⁸Victor J. Pospishil, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 6-7.

where Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches are denied the basic right to preach the gospel. "Now it is expressly permitted to them and to other Eastern rite Catholics to propagate freely the faith in their rite, of course, under the direction of the Roman Pontiff."²⁹ Article 5 clearly speaks about the need to preserve the spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches.

The Oriental Catholic Churches are making the Universal Church as Catholic as the Latin Catholic Church does. Vatican II has awakened the conscience to recognise the individuality of the Oriental Catholic Churches.

The Decree is usually referred to as *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, from the initial words. Its full title is *On the Oriental Catholic Churches, (De Ecclesiis Orientalibus Catholicis)*. The first draft proposed to the Council Fathers was *De Ecclesiis Orientalibus*, on the Oriental Churches. The Fathers had the intention of dealing with only the Churches which are in communion with Rome, not with all the Churches of Oriental traditions. Catholic was added to make this point clear. The identity of an individual Church is marked by its rite, which includes theology, spirituality, liturgy and discipline (CCEO, 28 # 1).

Orientalium Ecclesiarum expresses the love, admiration and respect which the entire Church has for the Eastern Churches. Their obligation to preserve faithfully their genuine traditions is underlined. The decree speaks about the right and duty of the Eastern Catholic Churches to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines:

This Council solemnly declares that the churches of the East like those of the West have the right and duty to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines. For these are guaranteed by ancient tradition, and seem to be better suited to the customs of their faithful and to the good of their souls (OE, 5)

Conclusion

Before concluding, the observations of one of the commentators on the *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches* may be cited:

Concluding these deliberations, we must state that the Oriental Catholic Churches were before the Council more or less treated as minor Churches needing a paternalistic supervision by the Roman Holy See. Of their own tradition, there scarcely remained anything important. They were

²⁹Victor J. Pospishil, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 14.

considered *de facto* as suffragans to the Roman Pontiff. This is why they could not be esteemed among the non-Catholic Orientals for whom nothing was as bad as an *uni-ate* Church.³⁰

The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches is a turning point in the evolution of the ecclesiology of the Church. It has opened the minds and hearts of many to recognise the fact of the existence of many individual Churches of different origin and traditions. This Decree also asserted and acknowledged the right and duty of each individual church to develop herself according to her own genius. The acceptance of this fact enables the Church of Rome to enter into serious dialogues with the Eastern Churches.

³⁰John Madey, *The Particular Oriental Vocation of the Nazrani Church in Communion with Rome*, Alleppey: Prakasham Publications, 1976, 32.