

## ***Background of the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, Orientalium Ecclesiarum***

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### **Introduction**

The Second Vatican Council also known as Vatican II, which took place from 1962 to 1965, was one of the most important councils in the history of the church, and it profoundly changed the structures and practices of the Church, especially in the role of Oriental Catholic Churches in the Catholic world as a whole. On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his decision to convoke a new council, within hundred days of his tenureship as the successor on the Papal throne. He called for an *Aggiornamento*, a freshening of thinking and practice that would enable the Church to do according to the will of God the Father and to serve the people of the world. The Council was inaugurated on 11 October 1962 by Pope John XXIII and the curtains were down on 8 December 1965 by Pope Paul VI. The Council documents consist of 4 Constitutions 9 Decrees and 3 Declarations. The fourth document issued by the Second Vatican Council, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, on November 21, 1964, was the *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches (Orientalium Ecclesiarum)*. This is a very small decree consisting of 30 numbers mainly designed to have a proper understanding of Oriental Catholic Churches within the whole body of the Church of Christ. The document is a giant leap for improved relations between East and West by learning and understanding each other with dignity.

### **Background of the Document**

Pope Leo XIII's Apostolic Letter, *Orientalium Dignitas* on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1894, marked a turning point in the history of Eastern Catholic Churches. In the Apostolic Letter, the Pope remarked that joining the Catholic Church strengthens Easterners' Apostolic link through Rome's Catholicity. Here Pope accepts diversity, not only in the liturgy but also in the discipline. His Predecessor Pope Pius IX established a Congregation of the Eastern Rite on 6 January 1862 as a section in the Congregation of Propagation of the Faith. Here we can see a

gradual change of the dominating character of the Roman Catholic Church over the Eastern Catholics which Pope Benedict XIV clearly says in his encyclical of 1755, *Allatae sunt*: “since the Latin rite is the rite of the Holy Roman Church and this Church is mother and teacher of the other Churches, the Latin rite should be preferred to all other rites.” More than all of these Pope John XXIII had a positive attitude towards the Eastern Catholic Churches as part of the Catholicity of the Church.

### **Synodal Commission**

Soon after the announcement of the Council in the year, 1959 preparations started immediately. In that year itself, messages were sent to bishops and experts in the Church regarding the Council and were expecting their suggestions. On 14 November 1960 tasks of the preparatory commissions were established. The Commission of the Eastern Catholic Churches was presided over by Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, the Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Rites, as the Chairman, and Athanasius Welykyi, OSBM as the Secretary. Among the members, two-thirds were Orientals. For the matter of discussion, Pope John XXIII set 4 items on the agenda transfer of rite, shared worship with Eastern Christians, how to reconcile the separated orthodox brethren, and chief disciplinary problems. Through the 56 plenary sessions, the agenda was divided into seven sections and was developed into a draft consisting of 52 articles and 14 short schemata(drafts). The draft came to be known as *De Ecclesiae Unitate*. In these 14 drafts, the central commission referred six to other commissions and the rest eight drafts were returned to the commission for further discussion.

The preparatory commission passed over its findings to the newly formed commission of the council comprising 30 members guided by the same Chairman and Secretary. Mar Joseph Parecattil, Mar Mathew Kavukattu, and Benedict Mar Gregorios were the members of this commission representing the Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara Church in India. Active speakers in the commission were Patriarch Maximos IV Sayegh of Melkite Church, Patriarch Paul Peter Meouchi of Maronite Church, Bishop Neophytos Edelby of Melkite church, Abbot Joannes Maria Hoeck of German Benedictine Monastery, etc. Among the key questions that

were raised during the discussions were A) the expression 'local churches' B) the obligation to remain in one's original rite C) the institution of Patriarchates and D) the Problem of shared worship.

### **From *De Ecclesiis Orientalibus* into the final draft of *Orientalium Ecclesiarum***

The first draft, *De Ecclesiis Orientalibus*, comprising 96 articles was presented in the preliminary session of the council in 1962. Many of the Council fathers noted that, it conveys Roman absolutism and that is against the catholic nature of the Church. According to them, the Papacy is treated as the foundation and centre for collegiality not as a governmental model to suppress and rule. Nearly half of the articles were omitted. The second draft of *De Unione Christianorum*, after adding 10 articles was presented on 29 March 1963. After evaluating the document, the council fathers gave proposals for the improvement of the document. At the beginning of 1964, the third draft was submitted to the council and the council again sent it back for further corrections with eighty proposals. The Secretariat of the commission again worked on it and compressed 54 articles into 29, because many of the points were shared with the decree on Ecumenism. On 15 October 1964, the final draft was submitted to the Council. In the following days, Council Fathers seriously discussed the topic, and votes were taken on 21 & 22 October 1964 in seven stages as

- A. Title (Article 1).
- B. Individual Churches or Rites (Articles 2-4),
- C. Preservation of the Spiritual Heritage of the Eastern Churches (Articles 5-6),
- D. Eastern Right Patriarchs (Articles 7-11),
- E. Rules Concerning Sacraments (Articles 12-18),
- F. Divine Worship (Articles 19-23),
- G. Relation with the brethren of the Separated Churches (Articles 24-29).

Among the seven only one (Articles 2-4), could not obtain the two-thirds majority and many conditional affirmative votes were also there. So again, on 20 November 1964, a new version was presented. The schema was retitled "The Decree on Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*) and was approved by 2110 Council Fathers, only 39

were against it. On the very next day, 21 November 1964 Pope Paul VI promulgated the document.

### **Salient Characteristics of the Document**

Even though the document is small in size major developments based on this document, happened in the Church. The introduction as we see now in the document emerged in the third version. The title of the document *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* alone changed the focus from rites to full ecclesial recognition as Catholic Churches. In the previous time, the Eastern Catholic Churches is considered mere liturgical rites and Uniate Churches. The document emphasized the equality and dignity of all the individual Churches both in rights and obligations. Until the time of the document, Evangelization or preaching of the gospel was entrusted only to the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the context of India through Roman Padroado. The council fostered the reunion of the non-Catholics without losing their proper liturgical rites. The council granted permission to establish parishes or even eparchies outside the territory of the *Church sui iuris*.

The council denied all the unfortunate attempts of Latinization both explicitly and implicitly in the oriental churches and asked the churches to go back to their ancient liturgical legacy. The council re-established and affirmed the rights and privileges of the Patriarchs and added the provision to establish a new Patriarchate or *Church sui iuris*. Patriarchs with their synod have the right to establish new eparchies and nominate bishops within the proper territory by the right of the Roman Pontiff. The council restored the initiation ceremony of the Oriental Churches; Baptism and Confirmation are given together to the candidate and the priest can validate the ceremony. The faculty of hearing confession is granted to all priests without proper jurisdiction. The Celebration of Easter is fixed to promote unity among Christians. The document says Liturgy celebrated in vernacular languages is promoted to inculcate a deeper understanding of the text but that is through the proper guidance of the legitimate Church authority.

## **Conclusion**

“The Sacred Council feels great joy in the fruitful zealous collaboration of the Eastern and the Western Catholic Churches and at the same time declares: All these directives of law are laid down given the present situation until the Catholic Church and the separated Eastern Churches come together into complete unity” (Article 30). The first sentence in the conclusion of the document is more optimistic whereas the tone of the second sentence is with the mindset of reconciliation and unity. Profoundly the document stated the equal dignity of the eastern churches together with its ecclesiastical disciplines and spiritual traditions. The document opened the doors for improved relationships and collaboration by understanding each other for the proclamation of the Gospel and accepting suffering in the name of Jesus Christ. We are going to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the Council within a couple of years. After these long years of its promulgation of the document on the Eastern Catholic Church, as an oriental catholic, I can understand the positive outcome of the document in the Church as a whole and to the Orientals in particular. This assignment helped me a lot to have a profound understanding of the background and cause of the formation of text and the Holy Spirit that guided the council Fathers for an incomprehensive vision towards Catholicity in a deeper manner.

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