

An Orthodox Reply to

“Why I Didn’t Convert to Eastern Orthodoxy - by Rev. Pr. Brian Harrison”

By Rev. Pr. Laurent Cleenewerck

Introduction: Fr. Brian Harrison is a professor of theology and Catholic priest in good standing who wrote this article for This Rock magazine (October 2008) and available here:

At this outset, Orthodox Christians should be respectful and grateful and this article is a chance to open an in-depth dialogue on some of the deeper issues that divide us. My comments are in bold, however, there are few “Proposals” that were also in bold in the original article. The reader should be able to recognize those easily.

I am probably a rather unusual convert to Catholicism, in that my spiritual journey to Rome involved both the other major world divisions of Christianity—Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy. As an undergraduate university student, guided by the rational *λογος* (*logos*) of classical philosophy (which Pope Benedict famously insisted upon as an attribute of God in his 2006 Regensburg discourse), I came to see the essential logical incoherence in Reformation Christianity: Its fundamental *sola scriptura* principle itself nowhere appears in Scripture and so is self-referentially contradictory.

I was also becoming increasingly convinced that if there is to be any true and definitive revelation from God to humanity, then—given that God has plainly not decided to offer this revelation immediately and directly to each individual—he will need to establish a completely reliable intermediary, perennially accessible here on earth to ordinary people like you and me. In short, an infallible teaching authority.

This is a very interesting – and very human, understandable – concern: the desire to have certainty on religious matters. However, this assumes that this is the way God actually works; with a rational, reliable, permanent answer on questions pertaining to God’s revelation. In other words, that spiritual truth is revealed rationally (a very Western / Scholastic leaning) in contrast with *theoria* (the vision of God in the Holy Spirit – the Eastern Orthodox tradition).

In fact, the record seems to indicate the very opposite, i.e. that God does not in fact provide complete rational answers to all theological questions. Even from a Roman Catholic perspective, there was no infallible canon of Scripture until Trent (1500s), no infallible dogmatic position on the Immaculate Conception until 1854 and indeed no dogma of papal infallibility until 1870. Let us consider the canon issue again: until Trent (1546), it was impossible for a Roman Catholic to be dogmatic about the canonical status of the so-called ‘deuterocanonicals’ (see the discussion of Cardinal Cajetan with Martin Luther). Even there, we can see that the matter of 3 Maccabees for instance was not quite settled:

"From these we see that the bishops at Trent were not silent about their silence on this question. They had a discussion about it. At the end of that discussion, they took a vote. This is a matter of record, not of interpretation. On March 29, 1546 the Council Fathers took up the fourth of fourteen questions (*Capita dubitationum*) on Scripture and Tradition. At issue was whether those books that were not included in the official list, but were included in the Latin Vulgate (e.g. The Book of Esdras, Fourth Ezra, and Third Maccabees), should be rejected by a Conciliar decree, or be passed over in silence. Only three Fathers voted for an explicit rejection. Forty-two voted that the status of these books should be passed over in silence."

Furthermore, there is no list of infallible papal statements (only a list of criteria which may apply to an unspecified number of proclamations), which has led Fr. Harrison himself to argue that *Humanum Vitae* (Paul VI's encyclical from 1968) did in fact meet the criteria of 1870 for infallibility, but his arguments have generally been rejected. As I have proposed in my book *His Broken Body* (which discusses Fr. Harrison's arguments and the whole issue of infallibility), it seems more logical to see the Church's infallibility in a soteriological sense: if the Church (i.e. a local Church or diocese in proper ecclesiology) is indeed the Church, it/she cannot fail to witness to Christ as Lord and Savior and by uniting human beings to Christ, it/she cannot fail to bring about their salvation. Among the early Fathers (Ignatius, Cyprian) this was the concern: how can we be sure that we are in the Church so that we may have the assurance that we are uniting ourselves to Christ (Ignatius use the Greek word *bebaeia* which is often and mistakenly translated as 'valid' when it really means 'assured').

Now, how is truth revealed? Truth is first and foremost a person, Jesus Christ, whom we encounter in the Church-Eucharist, "the pillar and foundation of truth." So, how was 'truth' revealed to God's people in the days of the Old Covenant? The Orthodox answer would be that spiritual truth is revealed by the Holy Spirit, not by logic or through an infallible system of human authority. This is why we have the prophets of old, moved by the Spirit, in conflict even with divinely approved authority (i.e. the king, the high priest). This is why we (East and West) have Saint Maximus the Confessor. This is also why the Orthodox say that we have to let the work of the Spirit in many lives and many places to help us look back on councils and writings to affirm their truth (or inspiration, which is in fact equivalent). This explains the long process of discerning the canon of Holy Scriptures. In the Orthodox point of view, only the Council of Jerusalem was intrinsically infallible; the other ones – even Nicea – had to await for the witness of Spirit in the life of the Churches to be revealed as certain.

However, with further reading, I found myself confronted by the reality of two great communions—the two largest in Christendom, in fact—presenting themselves as rival claimants to the gift of infallibility. I had long known of the Catholic Church's claim to be the divinely appointed authority endowed with this charism. But now—in 1971, that is—I discovered the similar claim of Eastern Orthodoxy.

I would actually disagree that Orthodox makes an exactly similar claim, although under Latin influence similar ideas may have been expressed. As the Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs of 1848 explains: "Moreover, neither Patriarchs nor

Councils could then have introduced novelties amongst us, because the protector of religion is the very body of the Church, even the people themselves..."

Constantinople now flashed onto my radar screen as a challenger to Rome. How was I to decide between them?

This reveals a misunderstanding. Constantinople is not a challenger to Rome. Constantinople does not claim any of the things claimed by Rome; it is simply the functional primatial center of the ancient and worldwide communion of the Orthodox Catholic Churches, including those of Jerusalem, Corinth, Thessalonica, Antioch, Cyprus, Alexandria (at least the Greek speaking community after 451), etc.

Not Quite "Catholic"

One reason for Orthodoxy's attractiveness back then was simply that, for me, its image remained refreshingly untainted by the emotional anti-Catholic Calvinist prejudices which I had imbibed against "Romanism" during adolescence. Nobody, as far as I knew, was describing Istanbul as "Mystery Babylon." I had read no reports of a Scarlet Woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, sitting astride a ten-headed Bosphorus Beast. And I saw no accusatory fingers pointing at Constantinople's white-bearded patriarch as "that man of sin"—the Antichrist invading the temple of God and blasphemously speaking "great things" against the Lord and his elect.

However, after a couple of tentative Sunday visits to Greek Orthodox liturgies in Sydney (I am an Australian), after which I attempted to converse with the local priest, obstacles of a very different sort soon began to swing the balance back in the other direction.

Fr. Harrison's situation was indeed rather unfortunate. What if he had lived in England, France or North America, would he not have found Orthodox parishes and clergy of his own language and culture? At the time, maybe not... But what about a Carpatho-Russian emigrant to Pennsylvania considering Catholicism and whose only options would be the nearby Irish or Polish parishes? One should also consider that the Roman Catholic mass was said in Latin everywhere until the 1960s... This being said, it is true that Australia was and still is a land of new immigration with strongly ethnic parishes, as was the case in America in the late 1800s-early 1900s.

Given the priest's very limited knowledge of English, any serious discussion between us on doctrinal or theological matters proved to be impossible. Indeed, he seemed rather surprised that I, as an "Anglo," should even be interested in joining his denomination. All his other parishioners, even there in the center of a large and cosmopolitan city, were ethnically Greek.

I was running up against the rather obvious fact that Orthodoxy is, well, not exactly *catholic*. It lacks the cultural universality and openness, the capacity to provide a true and welcoming home for all the world's tribes and nations, that is in fact one of the four marks of the true Church: one, holy, *catholic*, and apostolic.

It would be interesting to discuss the actual meaning of catholic, but the "rather obvious fact" is that Orthodoxy is amazingly universal. You can buy a world round

trip airline ticket and visit the Alaskan natives, the Texan converts, the Lebanese, the Greeks, the Finns, the growing East-African communities: Orthodox has remained the heavenly pattern of worship and yet become a fully integrated part of all these cultures. There is no reason why the entire world – from Kyoto's Orthodox cathedral to Chile could not be Orthodox! The missionary work of Saint Innocent in Alaska and Saint Nicholas in Japan are especially interesting here (1800s).

Every word of the liturgies I attended in Sydney—including the Scripture readings and preaching—was in Greek, of which I understood absolutely nothing. The thesis that Eastern Orthodoxy is the true religion was turning out to bear the practical corollary that, to share fully and fruitfully in the life of the Body of Christ, one would almost have to become a Greek. (Well, O.K., maybe a Russian, a Serb, a Syrian—but in any case the ethnic options would be very limited.) And this sort of very burdensome *de facto* addition to the Gospel was plainly foreign to the New Testament. On the contrary, its message stresses that in Christ there is no longer Jew, Gentile, Greek.

We have discussed this above: there are transitional situation when the Church (expressed in the parish) is going to be available in a particular language and culture that may not be our own. This was in fact the case in New Testament times and has unavoidable but temporary reoccurrences throughout history... Would this story still be true today? Here is some news from the area (Australia):

From ten parishes at his enthronement in late 1999, the total at the end of eight years of Met. Abp Paul's tenure, at the close of 2007, stands at approximately 34 parishes or missions and 1 monastery, including three English-language parishes in Sydney, Melbourne and the Gold Coast, served by 42 clergymen, including two university chaplains in Melbourne and the first Orthodox military chaplain in Australia.

In 2008, a "historic moment in the history of...the Archdiocese" occurred, with the Archdiocese accepting two denominations in the Philippines, including over 30 religious leaders and 32 churches with ~6000 adherents. This event was especially marked by a change in the name of the Archdiocese to include 'Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines', with Met. Abp Paul as primate of all three.

Does Orthodoxy Make Sense?

In short, Eastern Orthodoxy, as far as I could see at that stage of my journey, had certain strengths over against Catholicism, but also certain weaknesses. So I still felt far from certain as to where to go. Indeed, I felt confronted by another version of the same problem I had faced earlier in trying to decide whether Protestantism was true or false: the problem of having to negotiate mountains of erudition that could easily occupy a lifetime of study, if I was to have any hope of arriving at a definitive answer. If these detailed questions of theology, exegesis, and history had kept the rival Catholic and Orthodox experts in these fields interminably divided in spite of centuries of scholarly debate and oceans of spilled ink, who was I to presume the ability ever to reach any certainty as to which side was right? In this case the debate was mainly over the nature

of the Petrine primacy, as revealed in Scripture and manifested in ancient church tradition. And that huge controversy looked very daunting—and the outcome very doubtful—for this not-very-erudite young amateur searching for a clear and certain answer.

Of course, one simple answer would be to look at the nearest parish in full communion with the ancient Church of Jerusalem – the mother Church, in this case the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem/Holy Zion... Or how about the majority of Churches to whom New Testament letters were addressed? But that would also point to Eastern Orthodoxy... Another approach may be to read *The History of the Church* by Eusebius (I highly recommend Paul Maier's version) and decide what communion looks like what Eusebius describes at the crucial juncture of 325 AD. Looking for a self-chosen silver bullet shows that in order to finding infallible does involve personal fallible choice doesn't it?

Inevitably, in my prayers and studies, I began to wonder whether there was another quick, "silver bullet" argument like the one I had already found to be so fatal for Protestant theology?

And so, looking for a silver bullet or a short-cut seems quite simplistic, but let us consider Fr. Harrison's concerns...

That is, could a clear answer perhaps appear from studying the internal logical coherence or incoherence of Orthodox claims, rather than from the attempt to accumulate, interpret, and evaluate endless masses of biblical and historical data? Eventually I found what I still believe to be that answer: I discovered a fatal flaw in Orthodoxy's account of how we can know what God has revealed. In what follows I shall use a series of several simple propositions to argue that Eastern Orthodoxy's account of how the Church transmits revelation is vitiated by a circular argument, and so cannot be true.

First, if God has given the gift of infallibility to his Church, there must be some identifiable authority or agent within her capable of exercising that gift.

As we have seen, this is a problematic starting point. What do we mean by Church? What do we mean by "infallibility?" It is very easy to start exploring these themes without a sure footing...

Now, Catholics believe that the College of Bishops—the successors of the apostles, led by the pope, the successor of St. Peter—constitute that authority. The bishops can exercise the gift in several ways (as explained by Vatican Council II in article 25 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church). The whole group (the College of Bishops) can teach infallibly, either gathered together in councils that its leader, the pope, recognizes as "ecumenical" (that is, sufficiently representative of the whole Church), or even, under certain conditions, while remaining dispersed around the world. Finally, the pope, even when speaking alone, is guaranteed the charism of infallibility in his most formal (*ex cathedra*) pronouncements.

In the Roman Catholic system, "the Church" is the universal body of Roman Catholic believers and the Pope is the true head who has the charisma of infallibility. Ultimately, the Church and Episcopacy is absorbed (subsumed) in the

office of the Pope were things are decided beyond appeal (who shall be appointed bishop, what will be the code of canon law, proclamation of saints, proclamation of new liturgies, proclamation of new dogmas). In a sense, there is one point of failure – it is a star-shaped organization.

Now, what does the Eastern Orthodox communion see as the agent of the infallibility it claims for itself? In fact, it recognizes only one of those forms of teaching mentioned above. Let us highlight this answer:

Proposition 1: Infallibility is to be recognized in the solemn doctrinal decisions of ecumenical councils.

However, does this mean that the Orthodox recognize the authority of all the same ecumenical councils that we Catholics recognize? Unfortunately not. While our separated Eastern brethren claim that, in principle, any ecumenical council between Pentecost and Judgment Day would enjoy the charism of being able to issue infallible dogmatic decrees, they recognize as ecumenical only the first seven councils: those that took place in the first Christian millennium, before the rupture between East and West. Indeed, even though they claim theirs is the true church, since that medieval split they have never attempted to convoke and celebrate any ecumenical council of their own. For they still recognize as a valid part of ancient tradition the role of the See of Peter as enjoying a certain primacy—at least of honor or precedence—over the other ancient centers of Christianity (Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria).

Indeed, the ecumenical Councils took place in a particular context – that of the Mediterranean world and the Roman Empire – its decrees having force of Law in the Roman Oecumene. Without a doubt, this framework collapsed and the ecumenical-imperial context came to an end. Moreover, if ecumenical is taken to mean universal, it would have been less than honest to call a council ecumenical without the participation of the Western bishops. For that reason, although some Orthodox documents talk about an 8th ecumenical (still with Rome's participation), there is a sense that an universal-ecumenical council should be attempted without the participation of the West – this seems more like realist and respect than anything, considering that important local councils have taken place in the Orthodox world after 1054. Finally, one may wonder if there are still dogmas to proclaim more than a thousand years into the history of Christianity...

Thus, mainstream Orthodox theologians, as I understand them, would say that for a thousand years we have had a situation of *interrupted* infallibility. The interruption, they would maintain, has been caused above all by the "ambition," "intransigence" or "*hubris*" of the bishops of the See of Peter, who are said to have overstepped the due limits of the modest primacy bestowed on them by Jesus. However (it is said), once the Roman pontiffs come to recognize this grave error and renounce their claims to personal infallibility and universal jurisdiction over all Christians, why, then the deplorable schism will at last be healed!

Actually, this is quite true, with the qualification that the Orthodox world never considered Rome's primacy as "bestowed by Jesus" but granted by the bishops (i.e. Nicea, Sardica, Imperial rulings, Constantinople, Chalcedon canon 28) for the sake of good order... In 1848, the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs did write:

“We see that very primacy, for which his Holiness now contends with all his might, as did his predecessors, transformed from a brotherly character and hierarchical privilege into a lordly superiority... Therefore let his Holiness be assured, that if, even now, he will write us such things as two hundred fathers on investigation and inquiry shall find consonant and agreeing with the said former Councils, then, we say, he shall hear from us sinners today, not only, "Peter has so spoken," or anything of like honor, but this also, "Let the holy hand be kissed which has wiped away the tears of the Catholic Church.”

The whole Church, with due representation for both East and West, will once again be able to hold infallible ecumenical councils.

An Insufficient Proposal

This position, however, turns out to involve serious problems. Our separated Eastern brethren acknowledge that any truly ecumenical council will need to include not only their own representatives, but also those of the bishop of Rome, whose confirmation of its decrees would in due course be needed, as it was in those first seven councils of antiquity. Well, so far so good. But does this mean the Orthodox acknowledge that the pope's confirmation of a council in which they participate will not only be *necessary*, but also *sufficient*, as a condition for them to recognize it as ecumenical? Unfortunately, the answer here is again in the negative.

Yes – this is an important point: Orthodox Christians do not see that a Council can be declared ecumenical on account of its membership. It would be said that as the Bishop of Rome represents the West, his presence is necessary, but certainly not sufficient. Otherwise, the Pope is infallible *ex-sese* (from his own see) and has no need of the council. This is why the Vatican council of 1870 (Vatican I) ended up in a papal bull (*Pastor Aeternus*) in which the pope mentions “the agreement of the sacred council” but ends up proclaiming the dogma of papal infallibility on his own authority.

And it is the Easterners' own history which has, as we shall now see, reshaped their theology on this point during the last half-millennium.

Actually Orthodox theology was not so much shaped as confirmed by historical developments. The Eastern churches knew that a pope could write heresy in a strong letter and thus can be condemned as a heretic (Sixth Ecumenical Council). Of course, a pope could also (and historically usually wrote) wonderfully orthodox theology, as Leo at Chalcedon. However, there were major changes in the papacy during the ninth century and one century does not guarantee the next. This is why an Orthodox review of the Latin councils after the schism (considered ecumenical by the Roman Catholic Church) and major papal statements only confirmed the Orthodox view that Western Christendom was unreliable. Indeed, I would argue that Vatican II ended up reversing or at least revising a number of past papal and conciliar statements (compare Council of Florence below with the current Catechism of the Catholic Church, such as:

“It firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go into the everlasting fire which was prepared

for the devil and his angels, unless they are joined to the catholic church before the end of their lives...”

However, Fr. Harrison himself is well aware of these problems and has expressed his support of the above decree (and the Feeneyite position) against what is taught in Roman Catholicism today.) For more on Fr. Feeney see <http://www.the-pope.com/feeneyite.html>)

In this article posted here: <http://oldsite.catholicism.org/fr-harrison-implicit-paper.html> , Fr. Harrison considers the above decree of the council of Florence as infallible and admits being in the minority in rejecting the revised teachings of Vatican II and the Catholic Catechism.

After the East-West rupture that hardened as a result of the mutual excommunications of 1054 and the brutal sack of Constantinople by Latin crusaders in 1204, two ecumenical councils were convoked by Rome for the purpose of healing the breach. They were held at Lyons in 1274 and at Florence in 1439, with Eastern Christendom being duly represented at both councils by bishops and theologians sent from Constantinople. And in both cases these representatives ended up fully accepting, on behalf of the Eastern Church, the decrees, promulgated by these councils, that professed the true, divinely ordained jurisdiction of the successors of Peter over the universal Church of Christ—something much more than a mere primacy of honor. And these decrees were of course confirmed by the then-reigning popes.

Why, then, did neither of these two councils effectively put an end to the tragic and long-standing schism? Basically because the Eastern delegations to Lyons and Florence, upon returning to their own constituency, were unable to make the newly decreed union take practical effect.

Indeed, the bishops represented their Churches and in this case the people the Church rejected this council as politically motivated and at odds with the ancient faith... This is the Orthodox understanding of ecclesiology and of the role of the bishop as icon/representative of his Church but not in an autonomous way.

At Constantinople, the nerve-center of the Byzantine Empire, an attitude of deep suspicion and even passionate hostility toward the Latin "enemies" was still strongly ingrained in the hearts and minds of many citizens—great and small alike. The result was that politics and public opinion trumped the conciliar agreements. The Eastern Christians as a whole simply refused to acquiesce in the idea of allowing *that* man—the widely feared and detested bishop of Rome—to hold any kind of real jurisdiction over their spiritual and ecclesiastical affairs.

As a result, in order to justify their continued separation from Rome, the Orthodox have had to nuance their position on the infallibility of ecumenical councils. They have had to maintain that the participation in a given council of bishops representing the whole Church and the confirmation of their decrees by the pope, while undoubtedly *necessary*, is still not *sufficient* to guarantee the true ecumenical status of that council. For over and above the fulfillment of those conditions, it is also necessary (so they have told us in recent centuries) for the faithful as a whole in both East and West—not just the pope and bishops or even the entire clergy—to accept that council's decrees as expressing the true faith. So the simple Proposition 1 set out above is now modified as follows:

Proposition 2: Infallibility is to be recognized in the solemn doctrinal decisions of those councils which are not only papally confirmed as ecumenical, but which are also subsequently accepted as such by the whole Church.

In the post-Enlightenment Western world, wherein opposition to clericalism (real or imagined), and the ideas of democracy and popular sovereignty have long enjoyed great popularity, this Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology, with its emphasis on the role of the laity, will naturally sound attractive to many. But on further examination a fatal logical flaw in the Orthodox theory comes to light.

Let's take a closer look here. If the crucial factor in deciding whether a given council's teaching is infallible or not depends on how it is received by the rank-and-file membership of "the whole Church," then it becomes critically important to know who, precisely, constitutes "the whole Church." How are her members to be identified? Who has voting rights, as it were, in this monumental communal decision?

A Murky Question of Membership

In answer to this question, our Eastern friends cannot (and do not) say that for these purposes the whole Church consists of all who profess faith in Christ, or all the baptized. For on that basis the Orthodox would rule out as "un-ecumenical" (and thus, non-infallible) not only the second-millennium councils recognized by Rome and the Catholic Church, but also the seven great councils of the first millennium which they themselves recognize in common with Catholics! For each one of those councils was rejected by significant minorities of baptized persons (Arians, Monophysites, Nestorians, etc.) who professed faith in Christ.

It is equally clear that the Orthodox cannot define the whole Church as Catholics do, namely, as consisting of all those Christians who are in communion with Rome, the See of Peter, the "Rock."

Actually, determining what the "whole Church" is in not quite as simply as what Fr. Harrison explains here. In Dominus Iesus (2000), an official document prepared by then Cardinal Ratzinger and approved by Pope John Paul II, the Orthodox churches are considered true Churches:

"Therefore, 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church..."

As I have explained at length in His Broken Body, this statement reflects problematic terminology and faulty ecclesiology, but it is important nonetheless.

As a result, we find Orthodox saints such as St. Sergius of Radonezh in the Roman Catholic calendar, which indicates a much more nuanced position on the part of official Roman Catholicism.

For they themselves have not been in communion with Rome since medieval times. Could they perhaps try to define the whole Church in terms of communion with their own patriarchal See of Constantinople? No way. As far as I know, no Orthodox theologian has ever dared to claim that the need for union with Constantinople is part of revelation or divine law. For not only was this see itself in heresy at certain periods of antiquity, it did not even exist for several centuries after revelation was completed in the apostolic age.

In short, any Orthodox attempt to define the whole Church in terms of some empirically verifiable criterion will land our Eastern brethren in impossible absurdities. So the only other course open to them, logically, is the one they have now in fact adopted: They attempt to define the whole Church in terms of an empirically unverifiable criterion, namely, adherence to true, orthodox doctrine.

This is where accurate terminology and theology are essential. We are dealing with several key concepts need to be understood: whole, Church, catholic, orthodox. I would invite those interested in the critical topic of ecclesiology to read Zizioulas' Eucharist, Bishop, Church as well as my own His Broken Body. The Church is the local Eucharist assembly with his bishop, presbyters, deacons and people. This is what the scriptures call the whole Church (do a BibleWorks search) and this indeed the same (even in etymology) as catholic Church. So "the Church is in the bishop and the bishop is in the Church" as St. Cyprian wrote. To be specific then, the Church is 'catholic' and the Faith is 'orthodox' – this is the normative language. The ideal is that the 'catholic Church' should always be orthodox, but that is not always the case, as happened during the Arian crisis. The 'catholic Church' (again the diocese) is the historic community with a continuity of ordinations in the city and normally in communion with the nearby Churches. From an Orthodox perspective, the Church of Rome still is 'catholic' but in error and therefore unorthodox. But sending in an Orthodox bishop and making him 'bishop of Rome' is not the solution – the Orthodox have never done that because the orthodox Faith does not necessarily make the catholic Church.

The concern expressed by Fr. Harrison about who is in the Church is projected at the universal level, who belongs to the right communion of Churches?

Unlike cities, sayings, and sacraments, doctrinal orthodoxy cannot be recognized as such by any of the five senses. It cannot, as such, be seen, touched, or heard—only discerned in the mind and heart. Thus, if we ask the Orthodox why do they not recognize as constituent parts of the whole Church those baptized, Christ-professing Aryans, Nestorians, etc., who rejected one or more of the seven first-millennium councils, they will respond, "Why, because they were unorthodox, of course! They lapsed into heresy while we—and up till that time the Latin Church under Rome as well—maintained the true faith."

Actually, it takes a long time for the Orthodox to say that a schismatic or heretical Church is no longer the Church at all. This can be seen in the effort of the Nicene Council to reunite the Novationists and later of Basil with the Arians. A local Church or group of Churches can be in schism or heresy for a while and then re-enter the Orthodox Catholic communion. It is only after long process of separation and decay that a judgment may be made that local Church is "beyond recovery..." As we can see in the Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs of 1848, this

still considered it possible to reintegrate the Bishop and Church of Rome into the Orthodox Catholic communion without much difficulty and without having to say that there was no manifestation of the Church in Rome for 900 years...

Now that the Orthodox position regarding infallibility and ecumenical councils has been further specified, we can reformulate it a third time, replacing the expression "the whole Church" at the end of Proposition 2 with another which clarifies what is meant by those three words:

Proposition 3: Infallibility is to be recognized in the solemn doctrinal decisions of those councils which are not only papally confirmed as ecumenical, but which are also subsequently accepted as such by the whole community of those Christians who adhere to true doctrine.

But here, I am afraid, we come face to face with the fundamental logical flaw in the whole Eastern Orthodox account of how we can know what—if anything—God has revealed to mankind. Since Christ founded his Church on earth to be a visible community, we cannot define her in terms of an invisible criterion—possession of doctrinal truth—without falling into absurdity.

The Orthodox view is that Church is literally ("this is my body") identified with the Eucharist which is the bishop, presbyters, deacons and people celebrating the Eucharist. However, the proposition above is not bad and does represent the Orthodox sense of how the Holy Spirit works among his people and how we can discern the work of the Spirit with assurance, as in the case of the canon of Scripture and with the inspired ministries of the Old Testament prophets.

The flaw this involves is that of a circular argument—including the term to be defined within the definition itself. This results in a mere tautology: a repetitive proposition that provides no information at all.

We can see this more clearly if we remember that the whole purpose of an infallible church authority is simply to enable Christians to distinguish revealed truth clearly and certainly from falsehood and heresy.

Actually, the emphasis is somewhat different. The purpose of the Councils is to avoid schism and to maintain the Eucharistic unity of the local Church and of the common union of Churches.

Keeping this in mind, we can formulate once again the Eastern Orthodox proposition, rewording Proposition 3 above so as to unpack the word infallible, spelling out its meaning and function:

Proposition 4: Christians can come to know with certainty *what is true doctrine* by recognizing the solemn doctrinal decisions of those councils which are not only papally confirmed as ecumenical, but which are also subsequently accepted as such by the whole community of those Christians *who adhere to true doctrine.*

The words italicized above lay bare the underlying circularity—the tautology—that vitiates the logical coherence of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. We want to know how to identify true Christian doctrine with certainty, but the proffered solution to our problem

assumes we already know the very thing we are seeking to discover. We are being told, "To discover what is true Christian doctrine, you must pay heed the teaching of those who adhere to true Christian doctrine"!

Not long after I came to the firm conclusion that Eastern Orthodoxy was illogical, so that its claim to infallibility could not be sustained, I was received into the Roman Catholic Church at the Mass of the Easter Vigil in 1972.

May this would be a good time to express the Orthodox proposition in one paragraph. It cannot be so short as to be reduced to a slogan but needs to be workable. True doctrine is revealed in Holy Scripture and this is discerned by the operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the people of God, which is those who participate in the life of the Church. When a controversy occurs, the truth is discerned by a network or community, the wider and deeper (historically) the better. Once a Council takes place (e.g. Nicea in 325) it may take many years (or centuries) for the common union of Churches to function as a network of sensors that will harmonize and stabilize. This is why the Orthodox often spoke of the five senses (five patriarchates) of Christendom as reflecting such a mechanism. One may ask then if it was wise for the Latin West to have dogmatic 'ecumenical Councils' without the *sensus fidelium* of the ancient Greek-speaking Churches...

A Problem at the Root

It remains only to add that, in the 36 years since I returned to full communion with the one Church founded by Christ, my conviction as a Catholic has only become stronger. For the Orthodox church today is by no means in the same condition as it was then.

Since this article was written in 2008 – 36 = 1972 (the post-Vatican II explosion of experimental liturgics), one has to wonder if it is the Orthodox or Roman Catholics who have 'adhered strictly to their ancient, stable liturgical traditions' to use Fr. Harrison's expression (below).

The very features which had most attracted me to it back then have now largely faded into a twilight of doubt and confusion. For some centuries the tenacity of the Orthodox in adhering strictly to their ancient, stable liturgical traditions, together with their relative isolation from the post-Enlightenment West, combined to act as a quite powerful antidote, in practice, to the effects of the ingrained virus of illogicality that we have just exposed. But in recent decades, with more extensive cultural and ecumenical contacts, and with an increasingly large and active Eastern *diaspora* in Western countries, Orthodoxy's underlying vulnerability to the same liberal and secularizing tendencies in faith, morals, and worship that have devastated the West is becoming more apparent. That virus—an inevitable result of breaking communion with the visible rock of truth and unity constituted by the See of Peter—is now inexorably prodding Orthodoxy toward doctrinal pluralism and disintegration.

Honestly, all Christians have to deal with modernity and are influenced by it – for the better and for the worse. There is also an certain, acceptable, level of doctrinal pluralism that is both unavoidable and healthy, unless one would wish to see everything dogmatically defined, as indeed seems to be the leaning of Fr. Harrison.

Actually, the unifying mechanism in Roman Catholicism is acceptable of papal supremacy, even though the liturgical, theological and spiritual experiences are so varied as to be irreconcilable. Unity is then administrative and juridical. In the Orthodox communion, unity is brought about by an irresistible, indestructible bond of love and shared faith and spiritual-sacramental life in the Orthodox Churches...

A traditionally minded Orthodox apologist might reply, of course, that confusion and dissent on these and many other matters are also rampant within Roman Catholicism, and indeed, to a great extent have spread to Orthodoxy as a result of powerful liberal and neo-modernist influences going largely unchecked in our own communion since Vatican Council II. This objection, unfortunately, is all too well founded as far as it goes. But it misses the vital point for present purposes, which is that the admittedly grave confusion in contemporary Catholicism is not due to its own underlying structure—its own fundamental theology of revelation. It is due rather to what many of us Catholics would see as a temporary weakness at the practical level: the level of Church discipline and government. We have witnessed a failure of many bishops, and arguably even recent popes, at times, to guard and enforce with sufficient resolve that doctrine which remains coherently and infallibly taught in theory and in principle by the Catholic magisterium. A solution to the present problems will not require the reversal of any Catholic doctrine; on the contrary, it will involve the more resolute insistence, in theory and in practice, on our existing doctrines. (This insistence, it is true, may need to include further authoritative papal interpretations of certain Vatican II texts whose ambiguity or lack of clarity betray something of the conflicting pastoral, philosophical, and theological tendencies that were apparent among the Council Fathers themselves.)

This where an Orthodox theologian would have to say that the current problems affecting Roman Catholicism are in fact rooted in its single-point of failure, highly centralized and administrative approach to unity. The changes to the liturgy (and the subsequent transformation of Roman Catholicism) were brought about by the papal pen and liturgical abuse authorized and tacitly endorsed (tragically) under Pope John Paul II's pontificate. In the Orthodox system, this would be impossible: Orthodoxy is a mesh or self-correcting network: any bishop who would alter the Church/Eucharistic life would be promptly removed, and there is no one pen who can effect change to the "faith (or pattern or worship) once delivered to the saints."

In Eastern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, the currently growing problem of internal confusion and division goes down to a deeper level. It is rooted in unsound principle, not just defective practice. It is a problem involving the essential defining feature of the Orthodox communion over against Catholicism, namely, its fateful medieval decision to repudiate the full primacy and authority of that rock established by Christ in the person of Peter and his successors in the See of Rome. Perhaps, if more of our Orthodox brethren can come to recognize the underlying logical flaw in their ecclesiology that I have tried to pinpoint and explain in this article, we shall see more fruitful ecumenical progress toward the restoration of full communion.

There is indeed a need to discuss ecclesiology and to be willing to look at the possible over-reactions and distortions that have taken place since the schism (and indeed before). However, if we start with the Orthodox (and we think Biblical

and Patristic view) that the Church (“the whole Church” of Romans 16) is what we now call the diocese, than we can discuss the following:

- **how the Churches relate to the Church**
- **how the Churches form structures of communion, at the regional, national and worldwide level**
- **what was the nature of the relationships among the Churches (including that of Rome) during the first thousand years**
- **what were the exact privileges of the Church/Bishop of Rome and what the difference is between a primacy of hierarchical privileges (Orthodox view) and the absolute authority envisaged by the post-schism papacy...**

This is what the Ravenna documents for instance are starting to discuss and this is extremely positive and encouraging...

Apart from theology, it would seem that there is a great divergence in the liturgical life of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodoxy today (especially since Vatican II) and this is a major obstacle that must be addressed.

In bringing such arguments to the table, Fr. Harrison is actually being helpful because it fosters in-depth dialogue. May it be rooted in Scripture and in the Fathers, and guided by the Holy Spirit who is the only revealer of Truth.

Fr. Brian Harrison, O.S., is a professor at the Pontifical University of Puerto Rico. He is a prolific writer on matters of liturgy and canon law.