DeVille's "Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy"

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but present now, for those who possess the eyes to see it.\(^5\) And a similar point is made by Jesus in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, 131: When a disciple asks Jesus “When will the kingdom come?,” Jesus replies, “... the Father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.”

Wendell Berry once wrote that “There are no unsacred spaces. There are only sacred places and desecrated spaces.” In a postscript entitled “My Ruins,” Mahmutčehajić recounts in heartbreaking detail the destruction of Stolac, analyzing the various ideologies that led to its desecration in different periods, including the destruction of the Muslim graveyards in 1949 and 1960, where the author’s own relatives were laid to rest. He explains how the tombstones were shattered to provide materials for new building projects, and recounts other atrocities that befell the city, including it’s plunge into hell in 1993, when the čaršija was leveled and all Muslims were forced to leave the city. But, in Mahmutčehajić’s own words, “there is no loss we cannot recover, no suffering from which we cannot learn” (93).

In some ways, this book might have also been entitled “Restoring the Sacred Center.” In 2003 the mosque and čaršija were declared national monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in 2004 reconstruction of the mosque was complete. Despite immense suffering, the sacred, and that which is divinely beautiful, can still shine through, should we have the eyes to see it. A poetic, learned, and lyrical work, Maintaining the Sacred Center provides us with a glimpse of paradise, seen despite suffering, and a foundation for seeing and reclaiming the sacred in the modern world. Reviewed by David Fideler, PhD, founder and editor of the journal Alexandria: Cosmology, Philosophy, Myth, and Culture. His books include Love’s Alchemy: Poems from the Sufi Tradition (Novato, California: New World Library, 2006), and, with Almira Alibašić, Sarajevo, a Spirit of Harmony: Religious Pluralism, Tolerance, and Dialogue (forthcoming).


Anyone concerned with Catholic – Orthodox unity should read this book. Indeed, anyone who wishes to understand this subject must be familiar with this book. DeVille has written an indispensable, scholarly book.

DeVille’s starting point is Pope John Paul II 1995 encyclical Ut Unum Sint (“may they be one” after John 17:21) urging Christian unity especially between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. However, since by most accounts the greatest obstacle to Catholic – Orthodox unity is the Roman papacy itself, a reform of the papacy is needed. John Paul II admits “This is an immense task, which we cannot refuse and which I cannot carry out by myself” (Ut Unum Sint). He then invites “Christian leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject.”

DeVille notes that while there have been many responses to Ut Unum Sint, from the offices of Protestant Churches and from individual Orthodox theologians and scholars, no official response from any Orthodox Church has yet been received.

DeVille provides for the lack of an official Orthodox response by constructing a consensus perspective on the papacy from the published remarks of Orthodox theologians and scholars during the last half century. The list of scholars consulted – e.g., John Meyendorf, Alexander Schmemann, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Paul Evdokimov, John Zizioulas, Nicholas Lossky, Olivier Clément, John Erickson, Thomas Hopko, Vlasios Pheidas, and Hilarion Alfeyev – includes many who are likely to be familiar to and respected by Orthodox readers of history, theology, and

\(^5\) See Plotinus, Enneads 5.1.4 (MacKenna translation). Based on his pun, the Golden Age, as Nous, is ever-present.
DeVille’s careful, and I believe fair, summary of an Orthodox position on the papacy includes the following statements: (1) The Bishop of Rome is accorded a certain primacy among bishops. (2) The Bishop of Rome should not have universal jurisdiction. (3) However, a “first bishop” could help restore a much-needed order to the Orthodox world by hearing appeals, organizing synods, implementing synodal decisions, and, in this way, (4) becoming a symbol of Church unity.

After reviewing Catholic perspectives on Catholic-Orthodox unity and the actual practice of ten of the largest Orthodox patriarchates, DeVille responds with his own proposal to reform the Roman papacy. DeVille’s proposal is inspired both by elements from the history of the Roman papacy, especially from its first millennium, and by the surprising (to me) variety of ways Orthodox patriarchates are organized including the rather unusual example of the Armenian Church. The goal of DeVille’s proposal seems to be to model and to perfect what is most valued by the Orthodox while preserving what works well in the Catholic Church. DeVille’s hope is that such reforms would pave the way for future Catholic-Orthodox communion.

DeVille proposes to separate the patriarchal from the papal or “first bishop” duties of the Roman primate. This division of duties, in turn, would be made possible by dividing the Roman Church into separate, continentally-based patriarchates each situated in a metropolitan see, led by a patriarch and a full synod of diocesan bishops, and administered and implemented by the patriarch and a relatively small, permanent or standing, synod of bishops. The bishop of Rome would at once be a diocesan bishop, a patriarch, and the first (bishop) among equals. The Bishop of Rome, the other patriarchs, and other diocesan bishops would be elected by synods, the latter in ways that could be peculiar to each patriarchate.

DeVille’s proposal would devolve many of the duties of the Roman papacy to synods. “The papacy has for too long undertaken an amalgam of responsibilities, some patriarchal, some papal, some purely local” (Orthodoxy . . ., 146). DeVille’s proposal would decentralize the Roman Church and ameliorate its current bureaucracy. The principle of collegiality so valued by the Orthodox would be strengthened while, at the same time, a necessary and concomitant principle of hierarchy would be preserved.

This book is impeccably organized and balanced. Of its 269 pages, 163 are narrative, 75 are endnotes, and 29 are bibliography. DeVille’s tone is irenic and scholarly. He strives to include and to fairly evaluate all relevant, serious opinion. DeVille’s proposal for reforming the Roman papacy is creative and responsible. Whether it is practical or not is another question.

Unfortunately, I sense little enthusiasm or urgency for Catholic – Orthodox unity among the Orthodox faithful. DeVille’s analysis, concentrating as it does on structure while ignoring spirituality and liturgical practice, may strike some Orthodox as missing the point. Apparently, DeVille imagines that much diversity would be incorporated into the liturgical and spiritual life of the different patriarchates while unity and communion would be manifest in their common hierarchical and synodal structure. Both Catholics and Orthodox have something to learn from DeVille’s analysis and his proposal deserves to be taken seriously.

Reviewed by Don S. Lemons, Bethel College KS, an Orthodox Christian layperson who is a part of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America.