



What Orthodox Christians Can Learn from Pope Francis

The world will be watching from May 24-25, 2014 as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and Pope Francis welcome each other in Jerusalem to observe the anniversary of the historic encounter between Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and the subsequent lifting of mutual anathemas. The main focus of the many scholars and reporters who will cover this event will be the elusive question of “Old Rome and New Rome” that is the question of unity between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. However, hidden amidst all this media coverage will be a unique opportunity for Orthodox Christians to follow the example of Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of blessed memory and to meet the Pope of Rome again as if for the first time.

At first glance, the idea of Orthodox Christians being able to learn from the Pope of Rome appears out of place if not altogether wrong. However, Orthodox Christians should pause before rushing to judgment about such matters and remember that prior to the Great Schism of 1054, the Pope of Rome was honored with reverence and respect throughout the Orthodox World. Today, Orthodox Christians honor many Popes of Rome as saints including St. Leo the Great, St. Gregory the Dialogist and St. Martin the Confessor. Orthodox Tradition celebrates the lives of many Popes throughout the liturgical year.

Despite these facts, one of the present realities that is most disappointing is how some of our brothers and sisters have portrayed the Pope of Rome. “Dictator” and “anti-christ” are just some of the clichés that have been sadly used. While there have certainly been corrupt Popes throughout history (as there have been corrupt Patriarchs), Orthodox Christians must ask themselves whether or not the last 35 years have greatly challenged such stereotypes, especially when it comes to Popes such as [John Paul II](#), Benedict XVI, and the current Pope of Rome, Francis. Orthodox Christians should especially pause and take notice of the unique witness of Pope Francis. He is in many ways a bishop who reflects the Christianity of the first millennium when the Church was undivided. Pope Francis also models a form of leadership that is greatly needed in Orthodox Christianity today.

Here are a few lessons that Orthodox Christians can learn from Pope Francis:

Authentic Power is Service: One of the great tragedies of modern times is that Orthodox Christians constantly argue over power and status rather than service to the weakest among us. Church leaders debate about who is first and who is last. Clergy argue about the physical boundaries of Churches, who is entitled to govern them as well as about ancient titles that have their place in an ancient world that has long since disappeared. Amidst these arguments, Orthodox Christians need to pause and remember that power in the Church is a paradox. It is also neither a title nor a jurisdiction. Power in the Church is not about who kisses one’s hand but how many feet one can wash in the service of Christ. Pope Francis made this clear when he visited a youth prison in 2013 and chose to wash the feet of the offenders [including one who is an Orthodox Christian](#). “Real power is service. As He did, He who came not to be served but to serve, and His service was the service of the Cross. He humbled Himself unto death, even death on a cross for us, to serve us, to save us. And there is no other way in the Church to move forward. For the Christian, getting ahead, progress, means humbling oneself. If we do not learn this Christian rule, we will never, ever be able to understand Jesus’ true message on power.” St. John Chrysostom echoes this belief from ancient times: “To



love Christ means not to be a hireling, not to look upon a noble life as an enterprise or trade, but to be a true benefactor and to do everything only for the sake of love for God.”

The Church Lives On the Frontiers of Society: The greatest triumphs of Orthodox Christianity have taken place when the Church has lived as a missionary Church and not as an institutional Church. Pope Francis challenges Orthodox Christians with the following words: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.” Sts. Cyril and Methodios, St. Patrick of Ireland, and [Metropolitan Philip Saliba](#) are all examples of Orthodox Christians who took incredible risks and in the process grew the Church and spread the Gospel. There is no doubt that each of these men experienced their share of bruises in their work. Pope Francis reminds Orthodox Christians that a risk-taking Church—a church that is not afraid to fail—is much healthier than a Church that is focused on institutional security and closed in on itself. St. Tikhon of Moscow could not say it better when he writes that “The light of the Orthodox Faith has not been lit to shine only for a small circle of people. No, the Orthodox Church is catholic; she remembers the commandment of her Founder, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature and teach all nations’ (Mark 16.15; Matt. 28.19). We must share our spiritual richness, truth, light, and joy with others who do not have these blessings.”

Make Some Noise: The idea of Orthodox Christians making noise would seem contrary to our inheritance. Yet, a look at history shows that the Orthodox Church has been making a noisy mess of things since Apostolic times when the first disciples were labeled “Those people who have been turning the world upside down”(Acts 17:6). Such noise means rowing upstream against the world and challenging the world inside and outside of the Church to be faithful to the Gospel. Holiness always has a component that upsets the status quo. Pope Francis provided this bold exhortation to young people in Rio de Janeiro: “Let me tell you what I hope will be the outcome of World Youth Day: I hope there will be noise. ... I want you to make yourselves heard in your dioceses, I want the noise to go out, I want the Church to go out onto the streets, I want us to resist everything worldly, everything static, everything comfortable, everything to do with clericalism, everything that might make us closed in on ourselves.” In order for the Orthodox Church to be faithful to Her Tradition, she must step outside of Her comfort zone and proclaim the Gospel in its fullness with compassion and without apology. Evangelism is by its very nature a “noisy” business.

There is no doubt that countless words will be written in the following weeks about Roman Catholic and Orthodox unity. In truth, it is highly doubtful that such unity will take place any time soon. Common sense reveals that there are serious doctrinal and cultural issues that make unity extremely difficult if not impossible. Any serious Catholic and Orthodox Christian would confess as much. Orthodoxy matters and should never be compromised for the purpose of ecumenical convenience or social acceptance. That being said, the Church has always looked to the horizon outside of itself and has at times found truth in the most surprising of places. Fr. Thomas Hopko is correct: “God is not a prisoner of His own Church!” In this light, Orthodox Christians would do well to follow the present-day example of our father Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and give Pope Francis our kindness, consideration, and our prayers. After all, if the Pope of Rome can humble himself and wash the feet of an Orthodox Christian, then the Holy Spirit can indeed work in ways that we never before thought possible.

