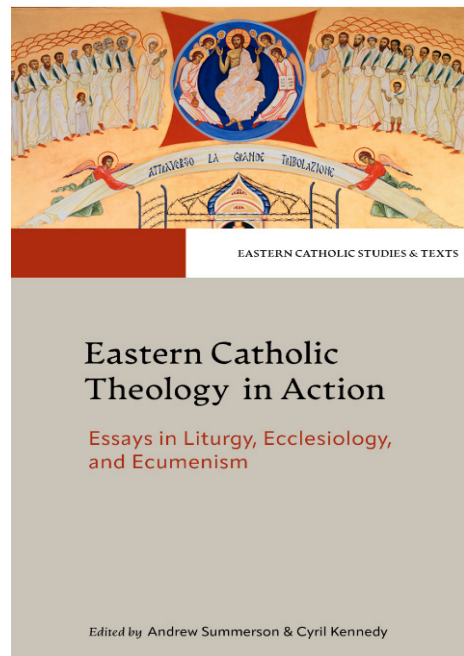


BOOK REVIEW

**Andrew J. Summerson & Cyril Kennedy (eds),
*Eastern Catholic Theology in Action: Essays in Liturgy,
Ecclesiology, and Ecumenism*, Eastern Catholic Studies
and Texts inaugural volume, Washington D.C.,
Catholic University of America Press, 2024.**

I am an heir of an Eastern Catholic Church, if faraway on the peripheries, having grown up and spent my life in a “Latin” Church environment half a planet away. My honored father, Theodor Silvas, was of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, and so was I according to the canon law of the time I was born and baptized. Patristic studies, especially of the Greek Fathers, reinforced my sensibility of the Christian East, and then wandering in the borderlands of ancient Armenia, Syriac Studies and contacts with the Coptic church wakened me to the so-called “Oriental” churches.



So it was with interest that I took up the invitation to review *Eastern Catholic Theology in Action* (“ECTA”). It has helped broaden and deepen my awareness of the many historical, cultural, political, ecclesiological, liturgical and theological ponderables attending those eastern churches which, after the collapse of the Union of the Council of Florence (1439), gradually made their way back, piecemeal, to communion with the See of Rome in the centuries that followed.

ECTA is the opening volume in a series dedicated to Eastern Catholic Church Studies, published by CUA Press. As such it reminds me of C.S. Lewis “Wood Between the Worlds” in *The Magician’s Nephew*. Any number of pools can be seen fading into the distance, so many portals into different worlds of exploration. Just so, ECTA is an eclectic collection of essays, accommodating writers of varying, complementary and occasionally contrary views. We must not expect any attempt to be systematic here. This is the perspective encouraged in the Series Editor’s Forward (xvi):

Our series is founded upon a firm belief that **Eastern Catholic theology is neither a footnote to the Roman Catholic theology nor a dim shadow of the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition**—even as it benefits from both **while engaging them in a critical dialogue**.

The parting of ways with Neo-Scholastic Latin Catholic theology was a long and tortured process for Eastern Catholics, but it ultimately succeeded due to a Copernican “turn Eastwards” prompted by such twentieth-century church leaders and theologians like the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, the Syrian Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV Sayegh, the Lebanese Maronite Fr. Michel Hayek, and the Indian Thomas Christians Fr. Placid Podipara and Archbishop Joseph Powathil. Thanks to this gradual liberation from the Latin Tridentine legacy, Eastern Catholics see themselves today, first and foremost, as emerging from and belonging to the Christian East. ...

Nonetheless it should not be overlooked that their own historical legacy and present-day pastoral experience **allow them to speak their own distinct voice: they can say something to the world that no one else, including Eastern Orthodox Christians, are able to say**.

Much has happened to challenge inherited attitudes in the past sixty years and more. Vatican II radically reversed the approach to the Eastern Catholic Churches that had predominated in the Tridentine Era. Often probed here in that connection are *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (1964), *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), *Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (1996), and other important documents.

Cardinal Sandri, quoted in Laschuk's essay, p. 173, offers us a valuable historiographical note:

The Eastern Churches and the Latin Church form one Catholic Church and thus they are equal in dignity and enjoy equality regarding their rights and obligations.

Until Vatican II, the principle of *praestantia ritus latini* ["the pre-eminence of the Latin rite"] was still understood to be true. This concept originates with Benedict XIV's Apostolic Constitution *Etsi pastoralis* (May 26, 1742) and his Encyclical Letter *Allatae sunt* (June 26, 1755). Although pontifical documents beginning with Leo XIII began to clarify questions regarding the Eastern Churches, the concept of *praestantia ritus latini* assumed the predominance and the superiority of the Latin Church in respect to the other Eastern Churches. The underlying idea was that the liturgical Latin rite alone possessed the full catholicity of the Catholic faith. [Hence the ruling idea of the time that "to Latinize is to Catholicize."]

At Vatican II in *OE* 3, a new perspective was established, declaring that "the Churches, both East and West (the Latin Church) ...enjoy equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite." In this way, it is declared, once and for all, that the Latin Church is not, in Catholicism, synonymous with the universal Church, and that its own laws are not the only ones in the universal Church.

A common theme, coded by the "in Action" of the book's title, is that Eastern Catholic "theology," whatever it is to be, needs to emerge from the multi-faceted, concrete, lived experience of Eastern Catholic believers. It is a point recapitulated by Metropolitan Gudziak in the last essay.

For the most part, this collection of writers and thinkers comes from a Ukrainian Greek Catholic stable. O but they are an intelligent lot, full of sensibility! The Romanian Greek Catholic situation gets only an occasional mention, till you come to generous coverage in Magosci's essay "Eastern Catholics in the Hapsburg Monarchy." The writers are vividly aware of the wider complex of Eastern Christian traditions, including, impressively, the Oriental Churches and their Catholic analogues. As to Ukrainian affairs, I learned of the oscillations of russophilia, ukrainophilia and polonophilia in late 19th century Galicia, covered in Mykhaleyko's essay, very thought-provoking for trends in Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy more broadly – particularly the russophilia. How historically literate and aware it behooves us to be!

Some essays seem to travel a bit far from the main thread, but do so in search of proposals to make for the future of Greek Catholic theology. Andrew Hayes studies St Ephrem the Syrian at length, translating his theological poetry directly from the Syriac, homing in on the wonder at the core of Ephrem's way of theology, and advancing this as a way forward for speaking theologically as Eastern Catholics. Anatolios studies the earlier part of St Athanasius' *Against the Greeks – On the Incarnation*, which engages the existential plight of fallen man, and how the coming of the Redeemer answers it, particularly in delivering us from idols. This is followed by a study of Heidegger's *What is Metaphysics?* The exposition is so good, even I began to understand *dasein* for the first time, and perceive its seductive quality. Using Hart's *The Experience of God*, Anatolios shows how Heidegger's enthrallment with existential finitude is a subtle turn toward idolatry, because it refuses the inference from contingency to the infinite being of God (pp. 98–104). And so we return to St Athanasius, and the importance he attaches to the witness of the Church and her saints in communicating to the world this deliverance from idolatry.

The editors have allowed in writers who occasionally disagree with each other. For example you find on p. 152–154 Laschuk discussing the change of terminology from speaking of a church of a certain "rite," to speaking of a church *sui iuris*. Nevertheless, you find Avvakum retrieving the use of rite "as a classificatory instrument consonant both with the post-Durkheimian emphasis on ritual in the sociological/anthropological study of religion and with the

focus on liturgy in contemporary theology after Alexander Schmemmann.” (p. 311). Or the same Avvakum, in the Foreword, politely countering the idea of a Russian Orthodox guest, Andrew Louth, that it is the “premodern” quality of the Liturgy that Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have in common, affirming that “the unique alloy of Western Baroque and post-Baroque modernity with premodern Old Slavonic liturgical culture that created the fascination of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Uniate tradition” (p. xviii). Let me say in passing that the exploratory, eirenic and ‘catholic’ spirit of Louth’s essay is much appreciated.

Or you notice Summerson and Kennedy using the pejorative terms “justly” and “proselytism” in reporting the Balamand Declaration of 1993 against “Uniatism.” Compare Avvakum’s less hasty and profounder advocacy of the “henotic” tradition which he traces back well before Florence: “The value of the henotic tradition should be shown critically **in its historical context**. Church unions and unionist theologies, with all their rare but stunning successes as well as deplorable failures, were in fact **the earliest attempts at ecumenical thinking**. ... Unionists’ **errors and defeats** are no less instructive than their triumphs because they **lay bare the bleeding wounds of the universal church**.” (p. xvii)

Aaah: laying bare the bleeding wounds of the universal Church – and doing so before and in Christ. That brings me to deeper lessons I draw from this volume.

Some of the keenest griefs and injustices of recent church history are not avoided in this volume, especially the sufferings of martyrs through the tyrannies of the 20th century. This has very special reference to the Greek Catholic Churches outlawed by Communist governments. As Avvakum says (p. xx): “A genuinely Eastern Catholic theological discussion of martyrdom cannot leave such issues unaddressed.” On this point, another Orthodox (OCA) theologian, Mark Therrien, reads the great icon to 20th century martyrs in the Basilica di San Bartolomeo all’Isola, in Rome. “In including all together, the icon intimates that, in the blood of those who confessed him who before his passion prayed that his disciples *might be one even as he and the Father are one* (cf. Jn 17:10, 22), all the sordid divisions of Christian history have already begun to end.”

Other lessons addressed to my heart concern the semantic field of “liminality,” “living on a fault line,” “being caught in the crosshairs of history” (xxiii), marginalization, inhabiting the borderlands between one thing and another, exposure to suspicion, incomprehension and blame coming from opposite sides. Such existential realities are not foreign to the historical experience of Eastern Catholics.

Another lesson, closely related, concerns the importance of a hermeneutic of history in the church. In looking back and composing our narratives about the church, we must not elide or ignore the conundrums, contradictions and scandals of history, but staunchly face them, as we hope to face our own sins, lay them bare before Christ, and wait on him till he shows these very real wounds shot through with the hope of glory.

Another thoughtful writer here is Brian Butcher. We may well take the conclusion of his essay to sum up the lessons I have been trying to articulate. I would only replace “criticism” here with “critical awareness”:

Ricoeur, while admittedly speaking of symbols in a different vein, speaks to the point at issue, in identifying **the fecundity of the particular**—that is, in our present connection, **the generative capacity of those very traditions which we have come to see as contingent and ambivalent**. The philosopher asks:

Could [we] go back to a primitive naïveté? Not at all. In every way, **something has been lost, irremediably lost**: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, **we can, we modern men, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism**. In short, it is by interpreting that we can hear again. Thus it is in **hermeneutics** that the symbol’s gift of meaning and the endeavor to understand by deciphering are knotted together. What we have just called a **knot**—the knot where the symbol gives and criticism interprets—appears in hermeneutics as a **circle**. ... We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand.

In other words, as the various essays in this volume have shown, the labor of interpretation does, by the grace of God, allow for us to reclaim

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the stories of our saints: to vindicate the traditions representing and simultaneously expressing our “orthodoxy,” **if only ever so with *an awareness of their ambiguity*.**

I hope that I have sufficiently communicated some of the richness offered in *Eastern Catholic Theology in Action*, to inspire other readers with an interest in the ecclesiastical border-lands of the Eastern Catholic Churches, to take up this book and read. And may it be that this volume, as Summerson and Kennedy say (xxxi): “will begin a conversation that can deepen and broaden over time.”

I would hope that Christ’s beloved little flock, the Romanian Greek Catholics, step up into this conversation and share their own unique witness.

Anna M. SILVAS,
Adjunct senior research fellow,
Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Education,
University of New England, Australia
asilvas@une.edu.au

