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Debating the normative order between the center and the periphery: an East-Central European perspective

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A letter dispatched by the Roman Catholic bishop of Transylvania, József Antal Bajtay, on August 4, 1764, arriving in Rome approximately one month later, voiced a very sharp criticism of the Apostolic See's attitude towards the Oriental Catholics. The allegations made against the Latin missionaries by leaders of the Armenian and Greek Catholic ecclesiastical communities in the previous year prompted Bishop Bajtay to staunchly defend their conduct before the Congregation de Propaganda Fide. In his opinion, despite violating the apostolic constitutions that regulated the relations with the Eastern rite Catholics, a certain degree of departure from the law had to be tolerated and even encouraged tacitly. In a common rhetorical pattern, he depicted Transylvania as a frontier, where heresy and schism were reigning. Therefore, far from lending grace to Catholicism as might have been the case in other provinces, the maintaining of ritual individuality translated as an external sign of inner disparities, and was in the end detrimental to the Church.¹

The attitude expressed in Bishop's Bajtay letter raises a fundamental question about the extent to which a normative order, established by means of the papal encyclicals or through decisions of the Roman dicasteries, came to be implemented in local settings. As the cited example helps to demonstrate, the relation was less straightforward than presumed. But hesitation or outright refusal to comply forms only part of the history, which the archival documents readily exhibit. Difficult to discern, but present nonetheless, is the complementary dialogue instituted between the supporters and objectors of one specific set of policies, either at regional level or at the top of the Roman Curia.

It is my contention that this complex relationship between the center and the periphery could

only benefit from a global approach. Abandoning parochial fields of study in favor of large scale research and valid comparisons would in fact allow for a more rigorous study of the channels through which a certain normative order was shaped by the leading authority of the Catholic Church. More than a simple act of power, it occurred as the result of constant interaction between various experiences at the periphery – which sometimes were a world apart not just in terms of geography, but also in terms of the issues at stake – and the center's willingness to elaborate a uniform attitude that was to be later re-exported. This obviously involved a process of cultural translation, which was fundamental for the successful reception of the norms in distant territories. However, the course was far from unidirectional, as the heated debates on some of the contested subjects clearly indicate. The fact that the curial parties held diverging views, which they defended with changing fortunes, only exacerbated the local hesitations. By turning our attention to the wider picture, the global history has the potential to caution us with reference to the limits of constructing a normative order in the early modern period.

To further develop the example I started with, the Apostolic See's difficulties of relating to and elaborating a consistent reply to the immediate concerns in distant territories become instantly apparent. The prospect of the latinization of Oriental Catholics under the jurisdiction of Latin rite bishops and missionaries was a major area of contention from the second half of the sixteenth century to the legislative measures enacted during the pontificate of Benedict XIV.² The successive decisions by the Roman dicasteries and above all the papal encyclicals in the 1740s and 50s have amplified the confusion rather than clarify it. At its peak, their lack of coherence was so disconcerting,

1 Archivio Storico della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o de Propaganda Fide, Vatican, *Scrit-*

ture Originale riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali, vol. 806, fos. 122r–v.

2 PERI (1975); BASSETT (1967), in particular 35–49; HOFFMANN (1954) 77–161.

as to justify opposing readings of the same documents in the pleadings of Bishop Bajtay and his Greek Catholic counterpart, Bishop Aron, during their tense argument in the years 1763–1764.³

In the end, it was local conditions, not the imposition of central policies, that determined the solution to the conflict. Owing to their size, the Romanian Greek Catholics escaped further attempts of conversion to the Latin rite, while, on the contrary, the Armenian minority was to be gradually swallowed into the Roman Catholic diocese of Transylvania.⁴ It is exactly this sort of double standard that should make us wary of the effectiveness of formulating and imposing a normative order. This was, however, a situation not uncommon to other frontier of the era, as Bernard Heyberger's investigation on the Melkite and Maronite communities has pointed out. Despite enjoying, somehow paradoxically, a much less contested authority in the Ottoman provinces of the eastern Mediterranean, the Congregation de Propaganda Fide continued throughout the eighteenth century to act hesitantly when faced with key decisions.⁵

It cannot be said either that this was a conduct dictated by the lack of positive rules. Between the start of the century and the creation of the Greek Catholic diocese of Făgăraș in 1721 a number of papal and other curial documents instituted a juridical framework for the growth of the new Church in communion with Rome. In 1705 Pope Clement XI rejected the proposed plan to infiltrate Jesuit missionaries who were to adopt Byzantine rite for a limited time in order to facilitate religious propaganda.⁶ The fact that the pontiff's decision came only months after the accommodation strategies of the Jesuits in China were officially condemned is again proof of a world scale policy, which requires specific research instruments.

The clear separation of rites was to become a fundamental principle in systemizing the life of the Uniate community in Transylvania. Although the period is commonly associated with the assertion of the superiority of the Latin rite, the Apostolic See was for the most part a champion of conserving the traditions characteristic to the Transylva-

nian Byzantine rite Church. Even more significantly, its interventions corrected the local hierarchy, which was at times inclined to assume Roman practices. This was primarily the case of a dispute prolonged for decades between the Holy Office and the bishops of Făgăraș regarding the issue of betrothal and matrimony. By adducing the model of Tridentine legislation that was enacted with Rome's approval in the Greek Catholic dioceses in Poland, the latter contemplated a similar reform. Once more, the debate that followed put a considerable amount of emphasis on the papal bureaucracy's capacity to reach a decision, while the geographic distance meant that keeping the situation under control was all but impossible.⁷

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to imagine this approach as manifesting much uniformity over the course of time. The local context impacted on the disposition of the ecclesiastical leaders to present themselves as conservatives or reformists. On the other hand, the divergences of perception inside the Roman Curia were sometimes so acute, as to determine an overturn of a decision in a matter of years. Such was the case with the two requests to the pope in 1735 and 1743 by Bishop Klein, who demanded the permission to celebrate Mass according to the Roman Missal. Eight years hence, the consultors of the Holy Office and of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide prepared two conflicting reports, the first denying the granting of bi-ritual faculties, while the second supported it, by an elaborate comparison between Transylvania and the Greek communities in southern Italy.⁸

Ultimately, the Apostolic See acted as mediator in the process of integrating the various corners of the world in a standardized system of law. Pending further validation, the perspective that I propose underlines that this was the result of continuous negotiation carried out between one or more interpretations of the normative order at the center and their transpositions at the periphery of the Catholic world. ■

3 NEDIC (2010).

4 Ibid.; PETROWICZ (1988) 166–178, 195–200.

5 HEYBERGER (1997).

6 NILLES (1885) 960.

7 Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Fondo Santo Officio, Vatican, *Stanza Storica*, vol. QQ3d, fos. 120r–127v.

8 Ibid., vol. QQ21, fos. 515r–522v. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Vatican, *Fondo Benedetto XIV (bolle e costituzioni)*, vol. 26, fos. 378r–381v.

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