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**Oriental Orthodox  
in the Catholic Schools**

**Br. Jeffrey Gros**

*The Lasallian school, being Catholic, nurtures the faith of nonCatholic Christians and promotes unity with their churches through ecumenical prayer, building ecumenically sensitive faith communities, and educating about the faith of other churches and the Catholic Church's dialogue with them. (Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, Origins, Vol. 23: No. 9. Directoire Pour L'Application des Principes et des Normes sur L'Oecuménisme, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1994. Directorio para la aplicacion de los Principios y Normas sobre el Ecumenism, Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1993.)*

*Among the Christian groups in Lasallian schools are the Oriental Orthodox Christians (Armenian, Ethiopian, Coptic, Syrian and Eritrian) from whom we have been separated since 451. (Ronald G. Roberson, **The Eastern Christian Churches**, Washington: US Catholic Conference, 1999.) In some places, like Egypt and Ethiopia, they may be a majority in the Catholic school. In others, like the Middle East, they may be a significant minority.*

*However, in the North Atlantic and Latin American countries they may be small minorities, as in the United States. In these contexts it is particularly important to be sensitive and supportive of their faith and explicit in providing a catechesis that is accurate to the ecumenical progress that has been made, to levels of sacramental sharing that are possible, and to honoring the integrity of their faith. (Ronald G. Roberson, ed., **Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Pastoral Relationships and Interchurch Marriages**, Washington, US Catholic Conference, 1995.) A report from the US dialogue, where all of these churches are represented in dialogue with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops - the only place in the world where all of the Oriental Churches participate together - provides help for Catholic schools in their sensitivity to some issues that are important to these churches. The US situation is more complex than in European countries in that all Catholic education is supported by*

*a combination of parental tuition and parish or diocesan financial support.*

*The report itself is made to the Catholic and Orthodox bishops and has no doctrinal or juridical standing in either church, but is rather a support for implementing commitments already in place by the churches themselves.*

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**GUIDELINES CONCERNING THE PASTORAL CARE OF ORIENTAL ORTHODOX STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

**An Agreed Text of the Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in the United States  
St. Nersess Armenian Seminary,  
New Rochelle, New York  
June 7, 1999**

The Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in the United States has discussed at length the increasingly common presence of Oriental Orthodox students in the Catholic schools of our country[US]. Rejoicing in the mutual respect and esteem that characterizes the relationship between our two communions, we issue the following guidelines to promote a more effective realization of that relationship in Catholic schools. They are designed to offer specific suggestions that are consistent with the ecumenical policy of the Catholic Church and pay due respect to the pastoral practices of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

As Pope John Paul II reminds us, "...it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does; it must be like the fruit borne by a healthy and flourishing tree which grows to its full stature" (*Ut Unum Sint*, n. 20). Among the primary concerns of Catholic schools, therefore, will be to foster this ecumenical activity and to provide appropriate pastoral care for students who belong to other faith traditions, especially fellow Christians.

The Oriental Orthodox Churches today are the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India. Each of these churches is fully independent with its own hierarchy, but all of them are in full communion with each other. Because of this, it is

possible for the clergy of any one of these churches to minister to members of any other Oriental Orthodox Church. In order to assure appropriate pastoral care, it is clear that Catholic pastors, school administrators and teachers should have an adequate knowledge of the churches and traditions of their students. We have indicated below resources that we hope will be helpful in this task.

As a matter of principle, the Catholic Church does not seek converts among the faithful of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Thus every effort should be made to respect and even promote the participation of Oriental Orthodox students in the life of their own churches, and to avoid practices that could appear to constitute an invitation for an Oriental Orthodox student to join the Catholic Church. In particular, it is inappropriate for Oriental Orthodox students to be included in preparation programs for Confirmation or First Communion, especially since they will have received these sacraments at the time of their baptism.

Another practice that can give the impression of seeking converts is the requirement in some places of membership in—and financial contributions to—the Catholic parish where a school is located in order to pay a lower tuition fee. This can appear to be a financial incentive for an Oriental Orthodox family to join the Catholic parish. While the tuition policy of Catholic schools is a complex question and we cannot offer a solution to this problem that would be applicable in all cases, we strongly encourage Catholic pastors to find a way to allow Oriental Orthodox to participate in their schools without appearing to encourage transfer of membership to the sponsoring Catholic parish. It should be kept in mind that dual church membership is not acceptable for either of our communions.

Sacramental sharing is another area of concern. While the Catholic Church allows the Oriental Orthodox faithful to receive its sacraments in many cases (cf. CIC 844, §3 and CCEO 671), the Oriental Orthodox Churches themselves have varying disciplines on the matter. The Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches do not allow their faithful to receive sacraments in any church outside the Oriental Orthodox communion, but the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox do allow it in some circumstances. Care

should be taken to respect the discipline of the church to which an individual Oriental Orthodox student belongs. At the same time, care should also be taken to prevent an undue sense of exclusion among Oriental Orthodox students. Whenever possible, they should be included as active participants in Liturgies of the Word and other non-sacramental services.

In all these cases, the best solutions can always be reached by direct contact with the local Oriental Orthodox pastors of the students involved. They should be consulted whenever questions arise, and should be invited to participate in the pastoral care of the students who belong to his church by hearing confessions, teaching religious education classes, celebrating liturgical services, etc. Along these lines we recall the statement of the 1993 *Ecumenical Directory* n. 141, which reads, “In Catholic schools and institutions, every effort should be made to respect the faith and conscience of students or teachers who belong to other churches or ecclesial communities. In accordance with their own approved statutes, the authorities of these schools and institutions should take care that clergy of other communities have every facility for giving spiritual and sacramental ministrations to their own faithful who attend such schools or institutions. As far as circumstances allow, with the permission of the diocesan bishop these facilities can be offered on the Catholic premises, including the church or chapel.”

If no Oriental Orthodox pastor is located in the area, it is best to contact the nearest bishop of the church to which the student belongs. This information can be obtained from the local diocesan ecumenical officer or the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington. •

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## RESOURCE

*Ecumenical Formation of Pastoral Workers*, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1998.  
Pontificio Consejo para la Unidad, *La Dimensión Ecueménica en la Formación del Ministerio Pastoral*, *Diálogo Ecueménico*, 33,106, 1998, 203-228.