

East Meets West in Sacramento
Feast of Saints Peter and Paul
Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament
June 28, 2011
Rev. Constantine C. Pappademos

I would like to thank Bishop Soto for the opportunity to offer the homily this evening in this beautiful cathedral. Tonight is an occasion that offers a completely different experience for all of us. For me, I'm used to preaching on Sunday morning during the Divine Liturgy at the Saint Katherine Greek Orthodox Church in Elk Grove. Now, here I am at night preaching in the Roman Catholic cathedral of Sacramento, which, according to my calculations, can fit about two or three Saint Katherines inside.

Tonight is also a very different experience for each one of you. After all, it's not every day that you can go to a church where the presiding Catholic bishop sports a very Orthodox looking beard, and listen to a sermon offered by an Orthodox priest with a very Catholic looking face.

Bishop Soto has invited the Orthodox clergy and faithful of the Sacramento area here tonight as an extension of the exchange of visits that the Pope and Patriarch have observed every year on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul in Rome in June, as well as on the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle in Constantinople in November. The exchange is a gesture of love between the two divided halves of the Christian world, what has come to be known as the Christian East and the Christian West.

This evening, therefore, I would like to speak on the topic of East Meets West in Sacramento.

Several years ago, when this beautiful cathedral was being completely restored and seismically retrofitted, I had the opportunity to be given a tour of the construction work by the lead carpenter who was in charge of opening this massive dome up again, after it had been sealed in the 1970's. My tour began by walking up the exterior scaffolding and entering the ceiling space above us. Then we made our way to the base of the newly opened dome, which at the time, was comprised only of a

series of very long curved wooden beams or ribs. I remember peering over the edge of the base of the dome, looking down about 100 feet and thinking, this is very nice, now let's go back down.

Instead, however, my tour guide carpenter, a Roman Catholic fellow named Frank, scampered up some wooden slats that connected two of the ribs and stood at the top of the dome and said, "O.K. Father, your turn, come on up."

"Up there?" "Yeah, it's no big deal."

"Frank, those wooden slats were nailed between those ribs in 1860 and the empty space between those ribs leads to the floor about 150 feet down below."

"Oh, don't think about that, just come on up." "I don't think so."

"Come on, don't be chicken." "Better a live chicken, than a dead duck. I'm going to have to refuse."

"Why?"

"Look at it this way Frank, if I fell, could you imagine the headlines in the Sacramento Bee tomorrow? GREEK ORTHODOX PRIEST KILLED IN ROMAN CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL. That wouldn't look good. It would probably set the ecumenical movement back hundreds of years."

The division between Rome and Constantinople has existed for various historical, theological, cultural and political reasons, for at least a thousand years. It is not my place to discuss those things tonight.

Instead, what I would like to do is to examine the commonality that is shared by Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians living here in Sacramento. That commonality has everything to do with Jesus Christ, and is something to be cherished. Jesus Christ taught the great precept of His love – that beautiful fountain of tolerance, kindness and understanding among all human beings.

In the Gospel of Saint Mark, there is an interesting exchange between Jesus and His disciples. “John said to him. ‘Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us, is for us.’” (Mark 9:38–40)

So in that spirit, and in the spirit of Pope John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical “*Ut unum sint*” when he proposed that all differences that have disrupted between Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Church, be dealt with on the basis of the Patristic and the wider ecclesiastical Tradition of the first millennium, I would like to examine an important concept this evening that is embraced by both traditions...the concept of “theosis.”

Theosis is a Greek word that means simply, becoming like God. In English, theosis has been translated as deification, divinization or sanctification. It is a concept that is based on the writing of Saint Peter, whose memory we celebrate tomorrow, in his second epistle. He wrote:

“[God’s] divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world”(2 Peter 1:3-4 New American Standard Updated)

Theosis, or as Saint Peter says “becoming partakers of the divine nature”, is the goal for all Christians. If anyone asks you, “What is the meaning of life?” Your answer should be just one word – “theosis,” becoming transformed by God’s divine grace.

It is discussed at length in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and was developed extensively by Saint Gregory Palamas during the Hesychastic Movement of the Orthodox Church in the 14th century. The idea begins from the inner depths of each one of us and moves forward with the goal to restore the image of God inside of us. Our goal in life, in other words, should not be confined by time. Instead, we should constantly be oriented towards eternity.

In the words of Saint Paul, who we also commemorate tomorrow, “If our hope in Christ lies only in this life, then we are the most pitiful of all people.” (1 Corinthians 15:19)

So our focus should always be fixed on God and the eternity we will spend when we leave this earth, not just on ourselves or even on the day to day problems we encounter. The more we look to theosis as our guide, the more we embrace humility, the more sensitive we become to sin and the more we cling to Christ.

But the first step is to have an awareness of our own imperfections, to take the attention away from ourselves and to live a life of humility that looks to Jesus Christ more and more with every passing day. That’s what the early Christians did. They were known for being quiet, simple people who willingly shared what they had with those in need. Their humility and kindness is what distinguished them in the early years of the Church. Their struggle for theosis, to be transformed by Christ and His invisible power, was very real.

That type of selflessness was difficult to show during those early years of the Roman Empire. But it is even more of a challenge today. Our standard of living may much higher now, but the advent of the new social networking tools like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter all reinforce a type of mass public self-centeredness...not selflessness. Everyone wants to be famous today. Everyone wants to stand out.

Perhaps one of the best purveyors of the new social networking and self-promoting today, according to advertising consultants, is Lady Gaga. I read somewhere that she has the most friends on Facebook than anyone in the world. She is also is one of the most followed people on Twitter. Lady Gaga stands as a modern marvel of promotion. Even my 85-year-old mother-in-law knows who Lady Gaga is.

I doubt, however, that she will ever become a poster child for theosis. Yet, her extreme example of self-promotion stands as a good guide for what theosis is not.

Or to put it another way “Go for theosis, don’t go Gaga.”

The beauty of our gathering together this evening, Christian East and Christian West, is that as Christians we stand together to witness to our faith in Christ. In our increasingly secular world, we show that by our attitude, our words and behavior, our goal in life is to restore the image of God inside us and hopefully to reflect that image into human society. In fact, Orthodox and Catholic Christians in Sacramento stand together in their belief in the sacredness of life and in helping the poor.

We have talked this evening about theosis, or striving to become like God. Our course in life is Christ-centered. He remains our absolute center and our reference point at all times. He secures our unity throughout time, with His presence in each of us. His invisible grace has united faithful people throughout history, not through subjection to cold rules and regulations, but through lives that have been changed by His presence.

Amen.