

# A Quiet Revolution

The ordination of a married man into the priesthood of the Melkite Church in the United States has triggered some far-ranging discussions of Eastern traditions and ecumenical prospects.

By WILLIAM BOLE

It was Christmas eve. Bishop John Elya, spiritual leader of the Melkite Catholics in the United States, and a night owl, had just returned to his residence in Newton, Massachusetts, after celebrating midnight Mass.

Instead of turning in, the prelate turned on his computer and logged onto the Internet. "To all my friends in Cyberspace, those who wrote to me recently (as recently as tonight) and those who wrote to me in the past. Grace and peace be unto you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ whose Birthday we celebrate," announced Bishop Elya, a Syrian-born cleric with silver hair and a goatee.

Typing out his greetings, and his wish that the Internet might offer a new tool of Melkite evangelization, the bishop mentioned one other thing in the form of a postscript:

The good news of the week is the ordination of Protodeacon Andre St. Germain to holy priesthood by the laying of my humble hand, on Saturday, December 21, at St. Basil Seminary, Methuen, Massachusetts. Father Andre St. Germain has completed all the philosophical and theological studies required by canon law. He has been at it steadily during the [past] two years and a half. I am very happy for the great enrichment which Father Andre brings to our presbyterate.

The word might not have spread far if this were merely the first time a bishop of the Byzantine tradition had announced an ordination in so un-byzantine a manner: over the Internet. But one or more of Bishop Elya's e-mail friends took the liberty of posting the message on an Internet bulletin board, where it kicked around until the news finally



■ Father Andre St. Germain (with beard) acting in his role as a deacon several years ago.

arrived in print media—that the bishop's humble hand had ordained a married man to the Catholic priesthood.

## Looking the other way

Married priests are hardly news in the native lands of Eastern Catholic churches such as the Melkites, who are concentrated in the Middle East, and have their own patriarch in Damascus, Syria. While in communion with Rome, these Byzantine churches mirror the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy. They have

their own ways of worship, their own forms of ecclesiastical governance. They also have a hallowed tradition of calling married men to the priesthood, though most of their clergy are celibate and few of the large urban pastorates go to family men.

Circumstances are different, however, in the United States, where Eastern-rite Catholics form only a tiny minority among the country's Catholic population. The transplanted churches have been constrained by what is usually

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referred to as a "ban" on the ordination of non-celibate men. The understanding goes back seven decades or more, to when American bishops of the Western or "Latin" Church pleaded to Rome that the presence of married clergy in this country would confuse the immigrant Church and demoralize her priests.

For help in ministering to their own ethnic congregations, Byzantine bishops in the United States have often received foreign-born clergy—including some married men, educated and ordained in the old countries. This is perfectly licit, done with the blessing of the Holy See. At times the bishops have also wiggled around the so-called ban by sending married priestly candidates and their families abroad for a fast ordination, and then "borrowing" them back from the mother-country hierarchies. This practice has been an open secret in the Eastern communion if not the Western. In the Melkite Church, for example, the legal fiction accounts for a handful of married clergy in this country with such doubtfully Middle Eastern-sounding names as McCarthy and Russo.

In laying his hand upon Father St. Germain, born and raised in a French-Canadian parish in Manchester, New Hampshire, Bishop Elya has blown the whistle and ushered a married priest in through the front door. It is a step that has led to severe shocks in the past, beginning in the late 1920s, when the Vatican thwarted the ordination of married men in this country, triggering a huge exodus of Ruthenian-rite Catholics to Orthodox churches; and as recently as the 1970s, when Pope Paul VI clamped down on Melkite ordinations with less disastrous results.

History, however, does not appear to be repeating itself. The Vatican has neither blessed nor cursed the latest ordination. The only hint of Rome's thinking has come from Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, who, in declining comment to Catholic News Service, remarked, "It is not good that a third party intervene."

That "no comment" response struck many observers as a signal that the Holy See might stay out of the matter. If so,



■ **Archbishop Joseph Tawil ordaining a new member of the diaconate.**

the course would be cleared for ordinations of married American Catholic men in churches of the Eastern tradition.

Interestingly, however, the Melkite action does not seem to have arisen from any particular movement for married priests in the Eastern churches of the United States. There appears to be no serious number of married men lining up for ordination—or more to the point, no rush among Byzantine bishops to lay a hand upon them. While he has challenged the status quo, Bishop Elya himself says he had no intention of ordaining another married Melkite for at least a year.

Clearly, this story involves not just Bishop Elya's need for an extra priest, or the Vatican's regard for his pastoral con-

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venience. The front-door ordination of Father St. Germain raises some significantly wider questions, involving the future of the Eastern churches worldwide and the prospects of Christian unity as the Church enters her third millennium.

### **Why ask for permission?**

Over little cups of Middle Eastern-style coffee in the visitor's room of the Eparchy of Newton, the Melkite diocese that covers the country, Bishop Elya offered a simple rationale for the ordination. "I need a priest, and here we have someone who is very qualified," he said, motioning toward Father St. Germain. The newest Melkite priest—who has served at the chancery near Boston, and will continue to do—is now also available to handle parish duties for priests who are ill, vacationing, or otherwise unavailable; until his ordination, the eparchy had real difficulty coping with priestly absences, since few Latin-rite priests are trained in the Byzantine liturgy. The bishop maintained, further, that any barrier to ordaining a married man has been knocked down by the 1990 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. The code, for the first time, lays out the law for all these churches. It affirms the tradition of married clergy, but makes no clear mention of contrary practices in countries outside the traditional ecclesiastical territories.

The bishop did not seek the Holy See's blessing. "You don't ask for permission when you think you're authorized," he explained, adding that he also saw no reason to pull a few thousand dollars from the Melkite coffers to fly another family (St. Germain and his wife have two grown sons and two grandchildren) to Cairo, Jerusalem, or Beirut, for a quiet laying of the hand. "We used to beat behind the bush, but then I figured, there is no bush to beat behind," Bishop Elya said during an interview in late January.

The bush that he and others in the United States have beat around is really a thicket of recommendations, edicts, and interpretations issued by Rome over the past century. Most often cited, and perhaps misinterpreted, is a 1929

document titled *Cum Data Fuerit*, which sparked the Ruthenian rebellion. In the decades since that document appeared, the only licit ordinations of married men have taken place in none other than the Latin Church, which holds to no tradition of married priests. That irony has not been lost on Eastern Church leaders, who have seen disaffected Anglican/Episcopalian priests fitted in Roman collars while their own deacons have been left standing at the altar.

When Bishop Elya heard last year that a Methodist minister, still further removed from the Catholic tradition, was in the priestly pipeline, he felt the absurdity of the situation. As he explains: "I said, 'Hey, if they could ordain married men, why shouldn't we, in the Eastern Church, who have the tradition?' In my mind, the ban was non-existent."

### Working toward unity

While casting his motives as practical and pastoral, the bishop offered a more intriguing account of the Vatican's perspective. In his mind, the Holy See actually welcomes the ordination as a tangible sign of the Latin Church's esteem for Eastern traditions.

Such a message would certainly be welcomed by the Orthodox churches. And if these Eastern churches were assured that Rome would respect their particular traditions, the result could be a boost toward reunion of the Eastern churches with Rome, which is Pope John Paul II's ecumenical dream. "I suppose they (in Rome) would agree to whatever we do to show we are authentic" as Eastern Christians, Bishop Elya reasoned. He suggested that at the very least, Latin Church leaders know that if they were to block ordinations in any Eastern Church, anywhere, the result would be a setback in the ecumenical dialogue. "The Orthodox would take a dim view of it. It would not be received well," he says.

Naturally, the bishop and his colleagues in the Lebanese-based Melkite Synod of Bishops have their own ecumenical agenda. And their vision coincides neatly with the Vatican's plan. For several decades, Melkites have congre-

gated at the forefront of what is sometimes referred to as "de-Latinization." This is a process of renewal, or restoration, of the spiritual, liturgical, and theological traditions shared by the Byzantine Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Latin Church has encouraged Eastern Catholics on this path, with an eye toward overall Christian unity. Staying a step ahead, the Melkites have helped create a bridge to the East.

### Ecumenical implications

The thirst for Christian unity and universality is in the bones of Melkites. Sometimes referred to as "Greek Catholics," they trace their roots to early Christian communities that were among the first to be "Hellenized," or influenced by Greek culture. They became known during the time of the Byzantine emperor (or "melek") of Constantinople who appealed for unity amid the strife precipitated by the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which he



■ Bishop Elya.

embraced. (The Council rejected Monophysitism, which denied the humanity of Christ by claiming he had only a divine nature.) Those who followed the melek, and the Council, were referred to as Melkites.

The Melkite Church as it is known today was created in 1724, after a schism in the Antiochene Church, nearly 700 years after the Great Schism of Eastern and Western Christianity. The Antiochenes elected two rival patriarchs, one pro-Constantinople, the other pro-Rome, and two Churches came into being: The Antiochene Orthodox Church and the Melkite Catholic Church.

Last summer, the Melkite synod undertook a daring initiative. It called for the reunion of the churches of Antioch into one Church, in communion with both the Roman Pontiff and the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. In this mission the Melkites have received a green light from Rome—or at least that is how most observers see it—and a cold shoulder from the Orthodox, who say any end to the little schism at Antioch will have to await the ending of the Great Schism of 1054.

In this worldwide ecumenical picture, the question of ordinations in the United States is barely visible. Observers note that the ban, if there is one, affects a relatively small number of Eastern Catholics, principally in North America. Nonetheless, says Father Ronald Roberson, an ecumenical-affairs advisor to the US Catholic bishops: "It could complicate the dialogue. If the Vatican were still restricting [the practice], the Orthodox might turn around and tell us, 'You say you're going to respect our traditions, and here in the United States, you don't.'"

Father Hal Stockert, a Ruthenian pastor and theologian in upstate New York, is more emphatic. "It [the ban] could throw a wrench into the process," he warns. "The balancing here is extremely delicate. It wouldn't take much to toss it off." He believes that the question of married clergy—while dormant in the present dialogue—could erupt with unpredictable force if Rome were to renew the so-called ban in the United States.

So the ordination of one priest, in one small eparchy, or diocese, with only 25,000 members—a tiny portion of the Melkite Church, which counts roughly 1.5 million members worldwide—could have reverberations far beyond the American borders.

### What did Rome mean?

In a virtual instant after Bishop Elya posted his Christmas Eve e-mail message, news of the ordination flashed on the Internet through CINEAST, a Catholic information network that discusses Eastern Church affairs. Soon after came the crucial question, posted on the

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bulletin board in attention-grabbing capital letters: "IS THE BAN DEAD?" Not surprisingly, opinions on this particular question ranged widely, though most contributors cheered the ordination of Father St. Germain.

William M. Klimon, a Latin Catholic who is active in grass-roots dialogue in the Washington, DC area, said he wrote several years ago to the Eastern Congregation in Rome, and heard back that the ban was in "vigorous force." He added: "But I have a feeling that this 'discipline' will slip into obsolescence, and that the true Eastern discipline will be restored in the US." (According to the "true discipline," married men can be ordained, but priests cannot marry; bishops too must be celibate.)

In and out of cyberspace, "the ban" commonly refers to the 1929 decree, *Cum Data Fuerit*. The document, however, only applied directly to the Ruthenian rite in the United States, and did not close the door on ordinations of married men in America. It merely said that until the Ruthenian bishops could educate and ordain sufficient numbers of priests to serve their faithful, they would have to draw their clergy from the home territories of Galicia (in northwest Spain), Hungary, and Yugoslavia. The sting of the Vatican document came in the provision that all Ruthenian

priests "who wish to go to the United States of North America and stay there, must be celibates."

Father Basil Bishop, a theologian who drafted a recent background paper on married clergy for the Ukrainian Catholic Diocese of Stamford, Connecticut, says the 1929 ruling was essentially about the distribution, not the ordination, of priests. In other words, it governed the procedures by which the Eastern church could share celibate priests with the Ruthenians of America. But he adds, "They read into it what they wanted to read into it." Father Bishop is speaking (in the past tense, significantly)

of the nation's (overwhelmingly Latin-rite) Catholic bishops—who, in the words of Father Roberson at the bishops' conference, "felt that a married clergy would scandalize the laity and weaken the commitment to celibacy on the part of the Latin clergy."

Whatever the original purpose of the document, Ruthenian Catholics saw it as an unwelcome message. By most estimates, more than half of them bolted the Catholic Church for various Orthodox churches. Five years later, the Holy See weighed in again with a pastoral letter that alluded to "grave agitations and deplorable rebellions" among the American Ruthenians. Trying to alleviate the concerns of US bishops, the Eastern Congregation broadened the regulation beyond the Ruthenians, and built a firm case against the presence of married clergy.

In the United States, the Ruthenian population "represents an immigrant element and a minority, and it could not, therefore, pretend to maintain there its own customs and traditions which are in contrast with those which are the legitimate customs and traditions of Catholicism in the United States, and much less to have there a clergy which could be a source of painful perplexity or scandal to the majority of American Catholics," the Vatican announced in

this second statement. "Thus one can well understand how a married clergy, permitted in those places where the Greek Ruthenian Rite originated and constitutes a predominant element, could hardly be advisable in places where the same Rite has been imported and finds an environment and mentality altogether different." While ostensibly it was merely a repetition of the 1929 document, this new document added that "the regulation in question does not concern exclusively the Ruthenian clergy, but applies without exception to priests of all (Eastern) Rites."

### Testing the ban

Somehow, in the years and decades that followed, the rule came to be interpreted more narrowly—as applying only to ordinations in the United States, not the borrowing of married priests from the homelands. Over time, Eastern Church leaders have tested the ban, quietly or openly, in the States or abroad.

Father Philip A. Khairallah has described how in the early 1970's, Melkite Patriarch Maximos V decided to ordain two married American men who traveled to Syria, with the blessings of Archbishop Joseph Tawil, Elya's predecessor as eparch of Newton. As Khairallah relates in an article published in *Eastern Churches Journal* (Spring 1995), Maximos told one of the men: "I have tried gentle evolution with Rome to bring back our traditions. This has not worked. Now I want to try gentle revolution."

The revolt, quietly staged from the American shores, was perhaps too gentle, or subtle, to rouse the Vatican. There were no repercussions, until Maximos tried to do the same, this time in North America. It was 1977, and the Patriarch had agreed to ordain another American in Damascus, after a visit to the United States.

Father Khairallah, a married Melkite from the Middle East, now serving a parish in Cleveland, Ohio, recalls the occasion:

However, it was brought to the Patriarch's attention that since he was in the US, and the candidate was in the US, it would be ridiculous that

both wait a few weeks and have the ordination in Damascus, Syria. Again, the Patriarch agreed, and decided to hold the ordination in Montreal, Canada.

A few days after the rendezvous in Montreal, Rome let it be known that neither this nor the other ordinations in Syria had escaped the notice of the Holy See. "It was thought that these reverend gentlemen would not be assigned to service in the Eparchy of Newton," said a Vatican spokesman. "In so far as they were assigned to service in this Eparchy, their ordination was illicit."

In 1978, after a stream of letters from the East, Pope Paul VI wrote back to Patriarch Maximos. The Holy Father explained that the presence of married priests in the United States "poses some delicate problems for the Latin-rite community. This is why the Holy See, as your Beatitude has been informed from time to time, has decided, on this particular point, to suspend the application of the general principle of the preservation of the traditions proper to Eastern communities outside their patriarchal territories." So the case was closed; the priestly faculties of those illicitly ordained had been removed.

After that episode, the Melkites moved more cautiously. A few married men found their way to Middle Eastern capitals other than Damascus, for quick and quiet ordinations. More recently, the promulgation of the Eastern canon law has given Byzantine bishops in North America the feeling of a fresh start. On an October day in 1994, Ukrainian Bishop Basil Filevich of Saskatchewan, Canada, laid his hand upon a married candidate, Ivan Nahachewsky. Rome has forbidden ordinations of married Eastern clergy in Canada since 1930, according to Church leaders there. Yet this ordination stirred no real action from the Holy See, other than a disapproving press comment at the time by an official of the Oriental Congregation.

### Hardly a trend

As far as anyone knows, the ordination of Father St. Germain marks the first time a married man has been ordained in the Eastern Church of

America since the Ruthenian uprising of 1929. "This was not an in-your-face kind of thing," Fr. St. Germain emphasized in the interview at the chancery. "At first the bishop told me it couldn't be done here, that I would have to go to the Middle East. He was very prayerful about it."

Father St. Germain, 58, held secular jobs before joining the bishop's staff nearly two years ago. He and his wife, Claire, have been Melkites since 1966. His ordination is not likely to spark a trend. Bishop Elya admits the eparchy has just about all the priests its parishes



■ **Father James Graham models the vestments worn by Melkite priests.**

need, or can afford: about 50 scattered across the geographical limits of the Newton eparchy, which coincide with those of the United States.

Father Bishop of the Ukrainian diocese of Stamford says it would be thoroughly unrealistic to expect a revolt against the celibacy requirement among the other Eastern churches. "It's very difficult to support a married clergy," he points out. "Hospitalization (health insurance) alone for a family would drive us to the poor house. It just does not work in the modern world." The same economic logic affects married men as well, he observes: "Nobody is lining up to be ordained. Who's going to

work for \$12,000 a year?"

In the aftermath of the ordination, canonists have offered conflicting judgments on whether the Eastern code supersedes the earlier decrees, as Bishop Elya and his advisors contend. For now, however, the bishop appears to be getting the benefit of the doubt. Most telling, perhaps, has been Silverstrini's remark about there being no need for "a third party" to intervene. If the Melkites are the first party, and the Vatican is declining to act as a third party, then who is the second?

The answer, historically, has been the American Latin hierarchy. Yet as Father Roberson attests, the American bishops are unlikely to resume their antagonist role in this drama. Times have changed, he points out; the Latin bishops have their own married priests, about seventy of them, ordained from Protestant communions.

And then, of course, there is the ecumenical dream of the Holy Father, his vision of the Church once again breathing out of both lungs, East and West, as it celebrates the new millennium. Latin Church ecumenists such as Father Roberson, author of the widely acclaimed *Eastern Christian Churches*, cautions against exaggerating the ecumenical significance of the "ban," which he terms "a unique North American situation." Others such as Ruthenian layman David Brown, however, insist that the taboo remains as a heavy symbol of what they consider the Western Church's reluctance to match words with deeds in respect for Eastern Church traditions.

In the pews, where Brown sits, the watchword is "tradition" more than ecumenism, as far as the two can be untangled in the Eastern churches. "We're not looking to change the Western Church," says Brown, an Internet manager in Phoenix, Arizona, who converted from Protestantism and contributes to the CINEAST forum. "We're looking to have our traditions honored here in the States. But we're not going to be militant about it." ■

*William Bole is a freelance journalist in Lowell, Massachusetts.*