

The Pontifical Oriental Institute at the service of the Christian East



The recent article, “Earthquake among the Jesuits in the Pontifical Oriental Institute” has given rise among the friends of the PIO – the true friends, of course – to contrasting feelings. First of all, the precision in which the complex orthography of non-Italian names and surnames is respected is to be commended. Equally worthy of praise is the exactitude of the information communicated. On the other hand, the formulation of the title and even less so the judgments expressed by the author of this piece of news.

The image of the “earthquake” is completely out of place in the title, because the image evokes destruction and death. If one wants to make use of images, one more suited would be that of a “storm”, maybe a storm with sudden and violent gusts of wind, which brings down the more exposed trees on the slope. Yet everyone knows that a storm washes, refreshes, renews, and that after its passage it gives way to fine weather.

Then, as far as the two quotes which sign in a cryptic way the article, one must say that the various catastrophic expressions such as “débâcle”, “game of massacres”, “deserted arena, without winners or conquered”, should be respectfully sent back to the sender. Even if, as happens in every academic institution, not all classes are such as to harvest unanimous applause among those who frequent them; it is nonetheless true that the vast majority satisfies completely the expectations of the students.

Whoever speaks of “precariousness of so many courses, entrusted to instructors who assemble their material helter-skelter, in provisional transferal from other universities and forced to do in a few weeks what should last a whole semester”, betrays his ignorance of the complexity of the mission entrusted to the Oriental Institute, in particular to the Faculty of Ecclesiastical Oriental Studies. This Faculty, which from 1917 to 1971, that is from its foundation up to the creation of the Faculty of Eastern Canon Law, has been identified with the Institute itself, is divided into three sections: the theological-patristic, the liturgical and the historical. On its part, in the elaboration of the programmes of the courses, each of these sections opens up to the gamut of the various Eastern traditions: the Byzantine-Slavic, the Chaldean, the Malabar, the Malankara, the Coptic, the Ethiopic, the Armenian, the Georgian, and these are not even all there is to it.

In order to give the right space to these variegated and rich traditions (Catholic, Orthodox and pre-Chalcedonian), many years ago, next to the normal courses of 24 hours, condensed courses of 12 hours were introduced, which treat alternatively every two years those areas which are of less numerical importance. This operation constitutes a veritable challenge, both for the dean who has to make up the programme of studies, and for the secretary who has to find a place for them on the academic calendar. If one had to reserve for each of these courses a whole semester, ten years would not suffice to finish a licentiate. But the Pontifical Oriental Institute, on a par with every other institution, does not pretend to teach the all knowable; its duty is to transmit to the student a method of work which will enable him to walk on both feet. One may affirm, without fear of being contradicted, that no theological faculty in Rome or elsewhere, knows of a programme so articulate

and so complex. Now, since the experts on these numerically less important areas are not to be found neither among the stable teaching body and not even in Rome, it is clear that one has to go and look for them wherever they are found, offering them as intensive courses compatible with the activities of the institution where they reside.

In a word, the Pontifical Oriental Institute is called upon every day to respond to its mission wisely delineated in its founding charter “Orientis Catholici” of Benedict XV of 15 October 1917, namely that of being “a proper seat of superior studies in Rome concerning questions of the East”. It is this that the teaching body, for all their awareness of the limits of the staff and of the means of which they dispose, seek to achieve, combining teaching with research.

The publications which have come out of the PIO in these last years confirm that the teachers are by no means “researchers waiting for their pension” – fruitless researchers, in the accuser’s mind –, but seek, find and produce. It is enough to think of the Acts of the international symposium, *Le vie del sapere in ambito siro-mesopotamico dal III al IX secolo* (12 maggio 2011), Rome 2013, edited by Carla Noce, Massimo Pampaloni SJ and Claudia Tavolieri (www.orientalichristiana.it); or of the Acts of the international congress of liturgy, *The Anaphoral Genesis of the Institution Narrative in Light of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari* (25-26 October 2011), Rome 2013, edited by Cesare Giraudo, SJ (www.prexeucharistica.org); or of *La Vita di San Nicola di Sion* (testo Greco a fronte), note e commentario, edited by Vincenzo Ruggieri, SJ, Rome 2013 (www.lilame.org); or of the series, *La questione armena. Documenti dell’Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, etc., Rome 2013-2015 (with four volumes already published, and two still to come), of Georges-Henri Reussen, SJ (www.lilame.org). One thinks of the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, edited by Edward G. Farrugia, SJ, in 2000, and now about to be published in a much enlarged English edition (with more than 2000 pages). Of the series *Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien* (28 volumes), *Patrimonio Culturale Arabo-Cristiano* (11 volumes), *Textes et Études sur l’Orient Chrétien* (9 volumes), all under the direction of Samir Khalil Samir, SJ; without forgetting the prestigious series, *Patrologia Orientalis*, under the direction of Philippe Luisier, SJ (www.brepols.net). And this is not all.

The programme sketched by Benedict XV in 1917 was echoed by John Paul II in his speech on 12 December 1993 on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Institute. They are illuminating and far-sighted words:

“Dear Professors, instil into these young students the delight of the circular and comprehensive character of faith and of theology. May your detailed research be the school of method to better apprehend the universality of faith and its being reassumed in the unique Person of Christ, true God and true man, Son of the Father. The Holy Spirit will guide everyone to the communion of the Holy Trinity, taking experts from the fragmentariness of so many particular problems in which they will be in a temptation to become sterile.

Make an effort that the students, in the period of their stay in your Institute, acquire an articulate knowledge of the Christian East in its entirety: if this will be useful to the Latins, it will be beneficial in a particular way to Easterners, who will thus attain the instruments of the various Churches which compose the variegated mosaic of the Christian East. This may call for a major recourse to interdisciplinary studies and common projects among the professors: do not hesitate to undertake such a labour for the full fructification of your efforts and for the benefit of your students.

Make so that the Liturgy calls upon the Fathers and the Fathers help you to re-read Holy Scripture, and may Theology be the contemplative synthesis of this ‘Life in Christ’, strictly connected, indeed but one experience, with spirituality, according to the happy model which was common in East and West”.

Desirous to hear what the Successor of Peter will have to say in the now imminent centenary of the foundation, whoever feels anxious in view of what has happened in the last days should not forget that the Pontifical Oriental Institute has been entrusted to the Society of Jesus which in its history over the centuries has experienced so many ups and downs, and which certainly, looking beyond the storm which is under everyone’s eyes, will know how to point to professors and students alike that calm after the storm which everyone ardently desires, for an ever greater service of the Churches of the East.