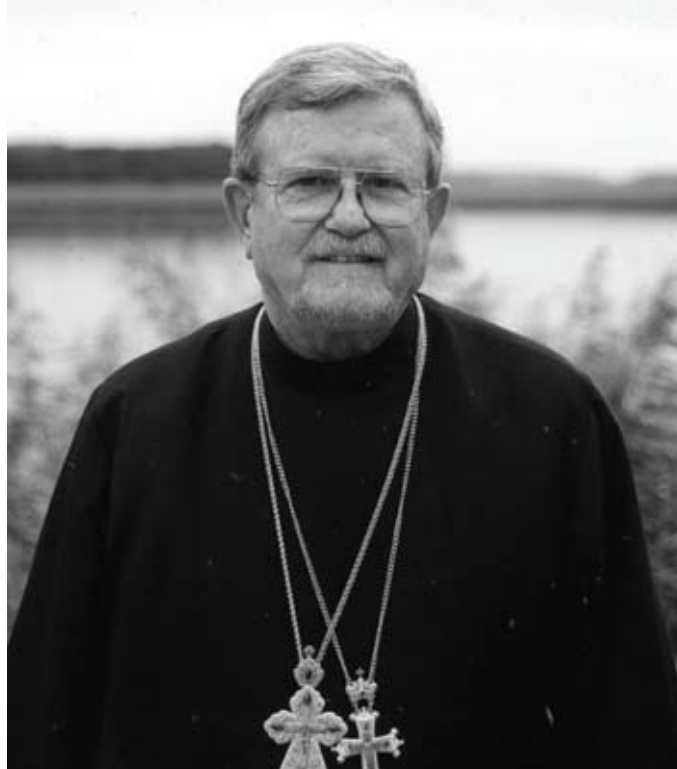


A Jesuit Bridge-builder in Rome

by William Bole



Fr. Robert F. Taft, SJ

Fr. Robert F. Taft, SJ, lowered himself carefully into a chair in the greeting room at St. Mary's Hall, the Jesuit residence of Boston College, and rested his metal cane nearby. Recent back surgery had slowed his stride, but not the discourse that flowed from this outspoken and internationally renowned Jesuit scholar.

On a visit to the United States this past summer, the priest, who has been assigned to Rome for 45 years, spoke of the less-traveled road he has taken as a servant of the universal Church. It's a journey that started officially in 1963, when, as a Jesuit, he chose to be ordained in the Byzantine-Slavonic (Russian) rite. Since then, the Rhode Island native has crossed ecclesiastical cultures as few have, helping to reverse centuries-old suspicions between Eastern and Western Christianity.

"I have always worked to be a bridge-builder, to reach out to other apostolic traditions, in order to heal the rifts," says Fr. Taft, a liturgist who taught at the Pontifical Oriental Institute for 37 years until 2007. For nearly that long, he has served as a consultor of the Vatican Congregation for the Oriental Churches, while penning 28 books and over 800 published articles and reviews.

He was born in Providence in 1932, a distant relation of both President William Howard Taft and Senator Robert A. Taft. As a young man, Fr. Taft began defending society's underdogs, so much that his father liked to call him the radical "fellow-traveler."

After entering the New England Province in 1949, Fr. Taft noticed that among the underdogs in the Catholic fold were the Eastern-rite churches in communion with Rome.

"These people had been kicked around in the Catholic Church, much like Indians on a reservation in the United States," he recalls.

There is, to be sure, a tangled history behind that sentiment, involving Church relations with not just Eastern-rite Catholics, but with Orthodox churches separated from Rome. Fr. Taft does not hesitate to insert his religious order into that dolorous past. "A major work of the Jesuits today should be repairing that harm" caused by centuries of misunderstanding between Eastern and Western churches, he says.

Making Strides

That is what the New England Province has been doing for decades, by assigning Fr. Taft to the ecclesiastical border region between East and West. There, the Jesuit has used his gifts of scholarship (and remarkable facility with foreign tongues) to unearth ancient commonalities between these traditions.

One of his signal contributions to ecumenical healing came when the Holy See considered whether to recognize the validity of the Eucharist as celebrated in the Assyrian Church of the East. This is the ancient apostolic Church of Mesopotamia, today with dioceses in many countries

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with painstaking scholarship.

including the United States (and formally united with neither Orthodoxy nor Catholicism). The Assyrian Church's Eucharistic prayer "of Addai and Mari" does not include the exact words of Jesus, "This is my body. . . This is my blood," in direct discourse, the saying of which had long been considered, in the West, a sacramental necessity. That made it problematic, as far as Rome's recognition went.

As an advisor to the Holy See, Fr. Taft argued that while the prayer does not use those words literally, said as if by Jesus, "It contains them virtually, in explicit references to . . . the body and blood and sacrifice of Christ" and other Eucharistic essentials, he later wrote in *America*.

The Vatican agreed. Its October 2001 decree on the issue made it possible for Catholics and Assyrians to receive communion in each other's churches when they are without a priest of their own church.

In the years since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Fr. Taft has been able to thicken his ties to the East. The priest has traveled to the far corners of Eastern Christianity, helping, for instance, to resuscitate a Ukrainian Catholic theological academy after the Soviet demise. He took on that particular mission in 1995, and was instrumental in the Vatican's decision to elevate the academy into The Ukrainian Catholic University, in 2002.

Praise from the East

He has received, among many special honors, three pectoral crosses, including one bestowed upon him by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the United States in the name of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Recognized for his solidarity with persecuted Catholics under Soviet rule, Fr. Taft was also ordained into the honorary Dignity of Mitred Archimandrite, in 1998, by the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. So he now carries the title, "Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Robert F. Taft, SJ."

Sr. Vassa Larin, a Russian Orthodox nun who did her doctoral work with Fr. Taft in Rome, points out that while his reputation as a scholar preceded him, his devotional life was a surprise to her.

"To find that this renowned scholar wakes up at a quarter to five to celebrate the Divine Liturgy every day; that he never leaves his room without his *chotki* [prayer rope similar to a rosary] in his pocket; that he keeps an exact record of the birth- and death-dates of friends and

colleagues so as to remember them in his prayers at the Prothesis [part of Eastern liturgy] on these dates — all this surprised me not a little," she writes in an unpublished book of personal remembrances collected on the occasion of an award given to Fr. Taft this past June by the University of Notre Dame Center for Liturgy.

Fr. Taft says his Italian doctor told him "Your spinal column is like the Leaning Tower of Pisa." So he is planning to return to New England as soon as he gets his affairs in Rome wrapped up. Still, he plans to continue lecturing, if not traveling much. And he'll continue — in the words of the Notre Dame citation — to help overcome "divisions between Eastern and Western Christianity the way a scholar should: by deliberate, painstaking scholarship."



View of St. Peter's Basilica from the roof of the Jesuit General Curia.

An important part of the universal mission entrusted to the whole Society is carried out by the Roman Houses immediately dependent on Father General: The Curia of the Society, those of the Interprovincial Roman Houses, and those individually assigned to a delegate by Father General. The total number of Jesuits in the Roman Houses in 2009 is 441, (four cardinals, one archbishop, 360 priests, 51 scholastics, and 25 brothers). Of the 441, 126 are students.

Source: The Society in Numbers. Documentation N. 89, April 2009, published by the General Curia of the Society of Jesus.