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Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, talk c

Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, talk during a meeting hosted by the Vatican Congregation for Eastern Churches in Rome Feb. 16, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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VATICAN CITY — Eastern Catholic churches must strengthen their liturgical identity, especially given ongoing conflicts in many of the homelands of those churches and the continuing migration of Eastern Catholics to countries where most Catholics belong to the Latin rite, said a Vatican official.

Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, spoke at the opening of a conference marking the 25th anniversary of an instruction from the congregation that urged Eastern Catholics to learn more about their liturgies and to exercise great care in translating the texts and modifying the liturgies. He said Eastern liturgies are a treasure belonging to the entire Catholic Church and bind it closely to the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches as well.

Cardinal Sandri told conference participants Feb. 16 that Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Christians "feel the wound of still not being able to sit around the one eucharistic table," but they also know that "we are heirs of a common treasure and very often of the same texts for celebrating the different liturgies."

So, he pleaded with the Eastern Catholic churches "to avoid solitary escapes in pursuit of reforms that do not take into account the heritage shared with the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches."

The cardinal repeated the instruction's call for Eastern Catholics belonging to the same ritual families — the Alexandrian, Antiochian, Armenian, Byzantine and Chaldean — to work together in studying their rites, developing educational programs for their faithful, translating texts and weighing any possible reforms before moving ahead with them.

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Archbishop Borys Gudziak, who heads the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, a Byzantine church, told the conference that in Philadelphia, people could hear four different English translations of the same text, depending on whether they were worshipping at a Ukrainian, Ruthenian, Melkite or Orthodox parish.

But he focused more on the instruction's call for the Eastern churches to recover the "mystagogical" role of the liturgy, its role as the place where, as the instruction said, "catechesis and religious teaching occurred; the Scripture was proclaimed and commented; the catechumens and penitents were prepared for baptism and reconciliation"; and from which service to the community flowed.

To strengthen that reality, Archbishop Gudziak said, what is needed is "not so much a change of rubrics, but first a change of hearts and minds."

"It requires the clergy and faithful to slow down, to take time to be with God and neighbor in common liturgical prayer and to engage in a sacrifice of time and energy in the calling of all humankind to engage in the sacrifice of praise of almighty God," he said.

And he also urged his fellow bishops to make sure their cathedrals are, as the instruction said, "places that transfer us to a different world, to the presence of God" because regular public prayer is taking place there.

If the cathedrals "remain empty because we ourselves are not praying there on a regular basis," he said, "our faithful lay people have every right to ask on the eve of every Sunday and feast day, 'Do you know where your bishop is?'"