

THE CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH AMONG THE EASTERN DISSIDENTS

In order best to comprehend and appraise what the conception of the Church is among those Eastern Christians separated from the Church, it seems categorically imperative to recall that traditional ecclesiology, common to East and West prior to the Schism, held to one teaching, namely, "The Church is a sacramental communion centered about the bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter."¹

Though the Schism separates the East from the West and eliminates the second and very important factor of the primacy of jurisdiction from the conception of the Church among the separated Orientals today, they hold no less to the first factor, namely, that the Church, as they conceive it, is a sacramental communion. Here it is not a matter of defining what they mean by "Church" for the true and one Church of Christ, in the fullest meaning of that word, rests upon the foundation stone which Christ himself designated. The Oriental Church separated from Rome will maintain that it is the true Church of Christ and that the Church centered about the Roman see is in schism. It seems quite undoubted that the separated Orientals, despite their somewhat antithetical presence in such organizations as the World Council of Churches, have nonetheless never departed from this radical view which they have held since the Schism.

Greater and more careful attention is being given today in both East and West to the notion of the Church as a "communion." To a certain and quite necessary extent it is a matter of semantics. Attention can be called to the Greek terms "koinonia," "koinonia agape," "symphonia kai eirene," and "agape," as well as to such Latin terms as "communio," "communicatio," "societas," and "pax." In these terms it is not difficult to understand the full impact of

¹ Cf. Ludvig Hertling, "Communio und Primat" in *Xenia Piana* (Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae), VII, 9, Rome, 1943, 4-48.

what papal encyclicals refer to as "pacem et communionem cum apostolica Sede habentes."²

The earliest Greek and Latin Fathers testify that the Church is a truly sacramental communion in that the Christian faithful are united sacramentally in a union of the sacrifice of the Eucharist under the presidency and authority of the bishop.³ The local community, or church, is in communion with all other communities or churches wherever they may be. Irenaeus looked upon the Eucharist as the symbol and reality of that communion and the popes did send the Eucharist to the bishops of Asia, for example, as a sign of that communion. The Council of Nicea, furthermore, distinguishes two communions: that of prayer and that of the Eucharist.⁴ The communion between local churches allowed the priests to concelebrate the divine mysteries and the faithful to receive communion in other churches provided they were in communion with their own church. These various churches, then, formed one people, one Church: the sign of unity, the bond of love.

This sacramental union of the Church is in the hands of the bishops who are individually responsible within their jurisdictions for the guarding of the faith and unity of the Church and with the authority of denying "communion."⁵

Further, the Church is a communion with the Church of Rome as its center. Everything gravitates about the bishop of Rome. From the earliest centuries of the Christian era this is historically true; it was always sufficient to enter into communion with Rome in order to be in communion with the whole Christian society. To this day, then, it not only suffices, but is necessary, to enter into union with Rome to be in communion with the other Catholic churches through-

² Cf. Tertullianus. *Adversus Marc.*, IV, 5. *P.L.* 2, 366; "Nec solas jam apostolicas, sed apud universas, quae illis de societate sacramenti confoederantur."

³ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius. *De Eccles. hier.*, *P.G.* 3, 444-5.

⁴ Canons 11, 13.

⁵ "Extra septem Ecclesias quidquid foris est, alienum est; aut si inde habetis aliquem unum per unum communicatis et ceteris angelis et per angelos supramemoratis ecclesiis, et per ipsas ecclesias nobis." (Optatus II, 6. *P.L.* 11, 959.)

out the universal Church. This is the criterion of sacramental union and communion.⁶

From this the Church is obviously a visible communion. The communion of the visible church on the level of the province or patriarchate draws efficacy from its communion with center; the Church, then, is a visible communion wherein the individual bishops preside over the sacrifice of unity under the ultimate command of the bishop of Rome.

The visible communion of the Church is as well a sign of the communion within the Trinity.⁷ The Church, then, sacramentally a visible union and communion, with a visible episcopate under the supreme rule of the successor of Peter in the Roman see, constitutes a common visible communion which is the cause and sign of an invisible communion of the mystery of God himself. This exhibits a unity which extends to a communion in faith, to a proper sacramental communion in the Eucharist, to an authoritative and jurisdictional safeguarding of the sacraments, and to a properly mystical union—a communion in the mystery of God himself in the most intimate union of the Holy Trinity. Locally considered, the workability of this *in pleno* is possible only insofar as the bishops as members of the apostolic college are individually under Peter, the Vicar of Christ.

These views, then, are the common heritage of East and West before the Schism. Since the Schism a noted change in emphasis takes place. Consequently, in the twentieth century it is not dif-

⁶ Cf. Bonifatius I. "Institutio universalis nascentis ecclesiae de beati Petri sumpsit honore principium, in quo regimen ejus et summa consistit. Ex ejus enim ecclesiastica disciplina per omnes ecclesias, religionis jam crescente cultura fonte manavit. . . . Hanc ergo ecclesiis toto orbe diffusis velut caput suorum certum esse membrorum. A qua se quisquis abscedit, fit christianae religionis extorris, cum in eadem non coeperit esse compage. Audio episcoporum quosdam, apostolico jure contempto, novum quidpiam contra Christi propria praecepta tentare, cum se ab apostolicae sedis communione, et ut ita dicam verius potestate, separare nituntur." (*P.L.*, 20, 777), in M. J. LeGuillou, O.P., "Eglise et 'Communion'" in *Istina*, no. 1, 1959, to which the method of the introduction to this paper owes much of its approach.

⁷ Cf. 1 John, 1, 3. "Ibi est communicatio sancta Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti ubi omnes fideles diebus dominicis communicare debent." Cf. Germain Morin, O.S.B., in *Revue Benedictine*, 14 (1897), 481.

difficult to note the obvious, namely, that the ecclesiology in the East differs sensibly from that in the West as far as the external life of the Church is concerned, its canonical structure and political status. History itself records what the advantages and pitfalls of looser organization in the East, and an overemphasis on the juridical in the West, have been and still are.

What Orthodox theologians within the past two centuries, particularly among the Greeks and Russians, have said is worthy of examination when it comes to a discussion of their conception of the Church. The citation of these theologians is necessarily limited and has not to be exhaustive.

When it comes to the doctrine of Orthodox ecclesiology that which is of chief value is in greater part an integrally preserved ancient tradition. Between themselves and ourselves there exist some serious differences which concern particularly the doctrine of the Church's supreme authority, infallibility, unity and notes. To appraise the cause and roots of these differences and the questions which arise therefrom it is necessary to consider one very conspicuous factor: the influence of the Oriental mentality which adheres to its own peculiar characteristics. Among the Oriental Christians separated from us there are to be found authors touched with a certain passivity, quietism, separatism, ultraconservatism and, alas, even fatalism. The practical sense is less developed. Efficiency is not at a premium. The mind is more inclined to abstract and theoretical speculation and to mystical contemplation. In these lie the virtue and at once the difficulty inherent in the theology of the Orientals separated from us.

Hence, it is easily understood that the Orientals do not always consider the Church in its external species, but more according to its internal "idea" and its mystical life with which they are preoccupied. At times, this internal life is altogether reduced to a taste for prayer and the Church becomes something only slightly more than a spiritual assembly. At times, as a consequence, the Church is not dealt with from a theological point of view, but rather in terms of its historical experience. On the other hand, it is quite unmistakably plain why some Orientals will object to the manner in which

some Catholic theologians treat the doctrine *de ecclesia* as too juridical, or even as materialistic and rationalistic. Some excess in the modern preoccupation with juridicism, factualism and rationalization in the western approach to ecclesiastical law and Sacred Scripture particularly, is as revulsive as the excess of an exaggerated romanticism and a disdain for the material order in the East.

Because of the Oriental attitude which can be termed conservatism in a special sense, and because their teaching on the Church is developed in that light, it is no wonder that the Orientals are inclined to safeguard integrally formulae of faith and, sometimes, even excessively to consider the deposit of faith as a kind of mummified body of truth and, hence, immutable, to which nothing can be lawfully added materially. This immutability is then often extended to accidental matters normally determined by ecclesiastical law. On the other hand, they are less concerned about the external social form of the Church either in its being determined or understood. As a result, the preservation of the extrinsic unity of the Church, or the defense of its independence as a perfect society, is not too clearly apprehended, either as a fact or as a necessity.

Therefore, in the Oriental Church, from the very first centuries of the Christian era torn by internal strife, whether of heretics or schismatics, there was not that natural aptitude or capacity for complete independence of the civil power and hence the concept of true unity and independence was obscured. This obscurity must always be considered in the light of historical fact: in the East the division of ecclesiastical provinces followed the division of political provinces. In the mind of many, then, the excellence and significance of hierarchical system was in proportion to the given place and conditions. Obviously, then, certain sees possessed pre-eminence and privileges as a result of political considerations.

It is no wonder, therefore, that such conditions caused theological concepts in general, and ecclesiology in particular, to be only more or less clear and precise in the East. The defectiveness in clarity arises to a notable extent from the fact that our separated Oriental brethren in their theology do not always possess certain and determined philosophical principles to direct their ratiocinations. But,

the Russian theologian, Tichomirov,⁸ considers the glory of Orthodox theology to be in this, namely, that it has never been manacled to any particular philosophical system. This does not, however, prove the methodology any less defective because it was *not* governed by distinct philosophical concepts.

And so, in dealing with the theological concept of the Church, some Orthodox theologians do not always sufficiently distinguish between that which is substantial and that which is accidental; nor, quite frequently, do they separate that which is *de iure divino* from that which is *de iure ecclesiastico*; nor the validity of an act from its lawfulness; nor the power of order from the power of jurisdiction. In view of all this, and further in the light of occasional Protestant influence, it is not difficult to see that without an infallible magisterium the Orthodox teaching is capable of discrepancy from the clear tradition of the Church before the Schism. It is easy, then, for the whole approach *de ecclesia* to be muddled.

Still, the mystical bent which is the ethos of Oriental theology has paradoxically, yet quite naturally and providentially, preserved what is a very vital approach to the Church. This approach is vitally Pauline in that the stress is placed on a local community⁹ and positive acknowledgement is made of the charismatic, but, unfortunately, all this is not logically pursued to the universality of spirit characteristic of St. Paul and, of course, of *the* Church with which he identified his apostolate.

It is common among Orthodox theologians where the Church is spoken of *simpliciter*, that they include in it the blessed in heaven, the souls of the just not yet enjoying eternal beatitude, and the faithful upon earth. According to the Russian theologian, Malinovskij, whose opinion is representative in most matters, the earthly

⁸ P. Tichomirov, *Orthodox Dogmatics and Philosophico-Religious Speculation*, Kharkov, 1899, n. 30.

⁹ Cf. J. Huby, *Saint Paul, la première épître aux Corinthiens* (Verbum salutis), 13, Paris: 1946, p. 5, n. 1: "Il (Eglise) signifie ou la société universelle des chrétiens, ou une communauté locale, et plus précisément cette communauté en tant qu'assemblée hic et nunc" in P. Parente, *Theologia Fundamentalis* (Collectio Theologica Romana), 4, Marietti, Turin: 1955, 136. It is to be noted that Parente's discussion of Pauline ecclesiology is exceptionally complete and succinct.

Church is nothing more than an integral part of the one true Church, both heavenly and earthly; the difference between the blessed in heaven and the faithful on earth is something only in our eyes, a kind of optical illusion, but not *quoad Deum*.¹⁰ The Catholic Church differs here in considering in its doctrine *de ecclesia* almost exclusively the earthly Church, its constitution, hierarchy and so on. The Orthodox, then, to the question of what is the Church give such definitions as "The Church is a supernatural and salutary assembly of men in a union of charity caused by the Son of Man,"¹¹ or "one spiritual body under Christ the Head, enlivened by the Holy Spirit."¹² To the question when the Church was founded, some will reply that its origin is to be found in paradise.¹³ Basically, however, the separated Orientals view the Church much in the spirit of St. John Damascene, that is, as a totality, but as a heavenly, mystical totality, just as St. John Chrysostom views the sacred priesthood as a heavenly priesthood. These are living statements insofar as the "activity" of Orthodoxy is essentially and primarily liturgical and sacramental. This is true of Catholicism, of course, but much of the sign of that living liturgical and sacramental reality is today obscured, and the Orthodox, as well as many Catholics cannot but think of the Church considerably in terms of an *acies bene ordinata* when it comes to the celebration of the liturgy. This in itself is not a totally undesirable thing, but it is a matter of where the juridical emphasis should be placed, and when it should be terminated, or sublimated, and give way to the mystical.

It is to be noted that because the Orthodox are not one with the successor of Peter, they are divided into national and provincial churches which are not quite always in agreement one with the other and are not quite like the apostolic churches and communities. They are quite independent in government and discipline and whereas the Greek Church at one instance may require the repetition

¹⁰ Cf. Malinovskij, *Pravoslavnoje Dogmatyckoje Bogoslovyje* I, Serg. Posad., 1910, 472. (Titles of Russian works are not rendered in the Cyrillic alphabet.)

¹¹ Cf. Troickij, *Ocherkij iz Historije Dogmata o Cerkvi*, Serg. Posad., 1912, 6.

¹² Malinovskij, *op. cit.* 475.

¹³ *Ibid.* 472.

of a previous baptism of the Catholic Church, the Russian may not or may, as the case may be. There is no necessary consistency. This freedom from the constraint of good order is a difficulty of Orthodoxy today. In the West we pray "pro ecclesia tua sancta, catholica, quam pacificare, custodire, adunare et regere digneris toto orbe terrarum una cum famulo tuo papa nostro Joanne" while the Orthodox and the Oriental Catholic pray in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom "for the prosperity of the holy Churches of God." For the Oriental in union with Peter there need be no discrepancy; for the Orthodox, on the other hand, though he surely includes the Church of Rome within this supplication of the litany, it is only as another of several churches or communities, not united visibly and juridically, but only mystically. This mystical spirit has produced a very superficial fellowship among the Orthodox themselves who regard true unity more in a pneumatic sense with the visible society being directed chiefly by the action of the Holy Spirit. Their shepherds are delegates, not Vicars of Christ, as the bishops of the Roman see. This, then, is a difference in emphasis which produces a difference in doctrine. Hence, any consideration of the Orthodox ecclesiologies, whether patriarchal, conciliar or "sobornost," must be in the light of this pneumatic sense, this mystical bent, and this freedom which is not within the control of an infallible magisterium.

There cannot be the slightest doubt in the mind of any Catholic, and particularly the theologian, that this mystical approach to the Church, and the rather elastic approach to organization, has, nonetheless, its merits and can achieve its fullest perfection only when it is brought into union with an infallible magisterium. That divine grace has preserved the Orthodox despite tampering with the sacramental life they profess is, doubtless, due in considerable measure to their unbounded trust in, and love for, the *Aeparthenos*, the *Panagia*, the *Theotokos*, the all-holy Virgin Mother of God, the Mediatrix and Dispensatrix of all grace. The position of Our Lady in the Orthodox Church is not purely devotional or appended, but very official and dogmatically founded. She is, after Christ, paramount in the communion of the Church. It is this ecclesiology of communion, in which Our Lady plays a notable part, which will bring the Orthodox into ultimate union with us. They see the Church

very really as a "Virgin Mother Church" of which St. Augustine speaks in his treatise *De virginitate*: "Mary corporally gave birth to the head of this body. The Church spiritually gives birth to the members of this Head. In both virginity does not impede fruitfulness; in both fruitfulness does not do away with virginity."¹⁴ It is a love of our Mother Mary and our Mother the Church on the part of the Orthodox which will be most fully reciprocated when those things which separate us will cease to exist. In their ecclesiology of communion the Orthodox speak chiefly of love, and with good reason. This spirit is very evident in a paragraph from the writings of an Orthodox priest, Father Alexander Yelchaninov, who died in Paris in 1934: "Man finds his true self in the Church alone; not in the helplessness of spiritual isolation but in the strength of his communion with his brothers and his Savior. The Church is a living organism, integrated by the common love, forming an absolute unity of the living and the dead in Christ."¹⁵

Cardinal Stritch evinced understanding of this ecclesiology of communion when he referred to the Orthodox liturgy which "when analyzed carefully, reflects the Church in Unity." Further,

It gives the lie to those who would try to identify these people with what happened at the Protestant Revolution and afterwards. And it has been the desire of all of us in the Church, in our seeking for the salvation of souls, in our seeking to increase the Unity which Christ has given us, to open our arms to bring back many, very many, and even all, of those of the Eastern Rites who are possessed of the fragment and need only to come into the Unity of the Church, to come into the fullness and glory of what was had when East and West were united in one Church under Peter.¹⁶

Cardinal Montini rouses us to a fuller understanding of the Church, which is an understanding of the ecclesiology of communion, when he states:

¹⁴ Cf. Augustine, *De virginitate*, 2: "Maria corporaliter caput huius corporis peperit. Ecclesia spiritualiter membra illius Capitis parit. In utraque virginitas fecunditatem non impedit; in utraque fecunditas virginitatem non adimit" in Parente, *op. cit.*, 250.

¹⁵ G. P. Fedotov, (ed.) *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, London, 1952, 445.

¹⁶ Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Address in *Proceedings of the First Unionistic Congress* (September 28-30, 1956), Illinois, 1958, 63.

The Church today is an almost unnoticed and connatural education for us. She must become for us knowledge and life. She has been a heritage from the past; she must now become a source of present riches. She has been a tradition; she must now become an awareness and a strength . . . her mission is diffusive. . . . It is a communication of grace and powers. It is a participation in the Priesthood of Christ. It is the effect of His charity. It is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. It is the carrying out of God's plan. It is the object of Christ's prayer."¹⁷

This ecclesiology of communion is at once something old and something new, and will be the basis for ultimate reunion of our separated brethren with us. This ecclesiology is the common teaching of both the East and the West, of the Greek Fathers and the Latin Fathers. Some writers insist on the mystical aspect, others on the juridical aspect, but it is the universal ecclesiology *par excellence* and, in a sense, it is at once an ecclesiology that is "catholic" and is "orthodox" with essential accord. It is the ecclesiology of a living and vital Church in the communion of its bishops centered in the Church of Rome, to which, by uniting with us, the Orthodox can add much extrinsically to a deeper understanding. It is the ecclesiology of a never-aging Church in the communion of its bishops centered in Rome, charged by Christ with assembling all men who hold the fragments of his truth into the unity of a visible society having the same faith, the same hope and the same charity, in the communion of the same Eucharist, under the presidency of a Supreme Shepherd who is the Vicar of Christ.

This ecclesiology of communion is a gift of faith, and in our times its impact and significance is two-dimensional, both spatial and temporal, tending toward the union and reunion of all men in the one Church of Christ. It is this precious heritage, somewhat obscured, not fully brought to its logical conclusions, which our separated brethren profess and which can and will, by God's grace, bring them into the brilliance of its fullest reality.

REGIS BARWIG, O.S.B.
Rome, Italy

¹⁷ G. B. Montini, "The Mission of the Church," *Unity Studies*, 21, Graymoor, New York: 1958, pp. 2, 14.