

## THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The fact that an Orthodox theologian was asked to speak at your Convention on a subject as general as *The Orthodox Church* is indeed a sign of our times: the recent developments in the ecumenical movement, and in particular, the massive involvement of the Roman Catholic Church since the pontificate of John XXIII, brings about a mutual and intense desire to meet and to speak. And the dialogue, quite naturally, must start with the very essentials. In fact, my book<sup>1</sup> has been written with the modern Roman Catholic reader in mind, in the hope that his queries about the Orthodox Church, its doctrinal position and its role in the world might be answered.

Today, I will stress only two points which seem particularly important in our contemporary dialogue. The first will be an attempt to understand the relation between East and West in the light of their historical development; the second will deal with the specific and crucial issue of ecclesiology.

### I. ORTHODOXY AND THE CHRISTIAN WEST

Four major factors can be singled out as having played a decisive role in the shaping of Western Christianity: Augustinism, Thomism, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. None of these, however, played any role in the shaping of the spiritual and intellectual world of Orthodoxy. There is no need here to pass any judgment, positive or negative, upon history. It is evident that both halves of the early medieval and medieval Christian world share the responsibility for their gradual estrangement from one another, and this estrangement itself is often the real cause of our present doctrinal differences which originally were no more than different problematics and sets of references and only later became mutually excluding dogmas.

<sup>1</sup> *The Orthodox Church, Its Past and Its Role in the World Today* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

Wherever the responsibility may lie, it is clear that the theological estrangement between East and West goes back to Augustine's anti-Pelagian polemics. Opposing the anthropological optimism of Pelagius, Augustine developed his doctrine of the original sin and of justification by grace, thus setting the essential frame of later controversies in the West. The categories in which a Western Christian viewed salvation, became those of *justification* from an inherited guilt, and of *merit*, made possible by "created grace." The reformers, on the other hand, rejected the idea of merit, and insisted upon salvation *sola fide*. Meanwhile, the tradition of the Eastern Fathers, if it mentioned at all "guilt" and "justification," did so only in a wider setting: it considered the very concept of *nature* as implying participation in God's life; it understood original sin not as an inherited guilt, but as a break of the original communion between God and man and as an enslavement to Satan; and it interpreted salvation, first of all, as a restoration of the lost communion with God, as sanctification and deification. The relations between God and man are thus viewed in the East in terms of organic participation, and not juridical obedience: salvation is not a simple state of forgiveness, granted when certain conditions are fulfilled, it is true life, true joy, true humanity, which can exist only in the communion of the Holy Spirit in Christ.

These few general ideas can, of course, only suggest the importance of the historical non-involvement of Orthodoxy in the main theological development of the West. They are absolutely necessary, however, in order to understand—to bring forth but one example—the Orthodox attitude towards the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which is conceivable only against an Augustinian view of original sin as inherited guilt.

Of course, all these differences and oppositions could have remained at the stage of *theologoumena*: is it not both desirable and necessary that different theological doctrines and attitudes coexist and compete in the One Catholic Church? However, later Western history, and particularly the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, broke the unity of Western Christendom and fixed theologies into dogmas.

During this Western tragedy, the Orthodox Church remained separated from the West not only by psychological and spiritual barriers, but also physically and politically. Its great intellectual center, Constantinople, had fallen under the Turks in 1453 and a great part of Orthodox Christians, in the Middle East and in the Balkans, were unable for centuries to maintain either an educational system or an intellectual tradition. And Russia would not emerge as an independent or leading cultural center before the nineteenth century. The faith was thus preserved in the liturgy, in monasteries, in popular piety. The exceptional richness of the Byzantine liturgical and hymnographical tradition, which was in itself a school of theology and which used languages understood by the people, can alone explain how the Christian faith maintained itself in the East during this dark period.

Today, we are living in an entirely different world. Of course, the Orthodox Church still finds itself in deep trouble. In many countries, and especially in Russia, it is again being deprived of possibilities to teach, to study, to publish. Its system of theological education, painfully and partially rebuilt since 1945, has again been reduced by more than half and, since 1959, is in danger of total extinction through the efforts of a totalitarian Marxist state. But there is a sense in which our times present a tremendous opportunity: the fatal estrangement, which kept us apart during the last millennium, has gradually lost its reality. Culturally, the old concepts of East and West have become historical reminiscences for ourselves, and even more so for our children. The nineteenth century, which was in Europe a century of nationalisms, has in fact inaugurated an era of universal culture, and the major social changes of our days now bring us even closer together. In such a great Western country as the United States, where Protestants, Roman Catholics and Orthodox from their youth share the same conditions of life, speak the same language, go to the same schools, where is "East" and where is "West"? This new situation gives us the opportunity and the responsibility to work together responsibly in one of the big tasks of the present-day ecumenical movement: the clarification of what are the authentic traditions of our churches, what is *Tradition*, and

what are the human traditions, or "non-theological factors" of Church life. For at least we, Orthodox and Catholics, know that *the* holy tradition of the Church is *one* and *indivisible*: it should unite us all in the truth, while the licit variety of human traditions should enrich us all, instead of dividing the members of the one Body.

One of the essential elements of the New Testament, the revelation of the *Holy Tradition* in its very heart, is unquestionably the mystery of the Church, the mystery of unity, itself. It is because we understand and live this mystery differently that we are still divided; let us try to clarify the issue.

## II. ECCLESIOLOGY

On the human, sociological level, the Church can be defined as an association of men and women accepting the teachings of Christ. However, the New Testament revelation implies that the Church is much more than that. It is God dwelling among men, it is the New Israel enjoying the presence of Yahveh in the bridal chamber, it is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Spirit. Where are all these biblical images and ideas objectively accomplished and realized? The Orthodox Church believes that this accomplishment is precisely the meaning of the *sacraments*. After his Ascension, Christ is with us and in us *sacramentally* through the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the sacraments cannot of course be opposed to the "word," for word and sacraments are, in fact, a single divine presence, and both are included in one single liturgical frame.

There was a time when the New Testament writings were not yet written, when the word "Scripture" had a different meaning from our own, when many elements of the Church's polity had a different shape, but there was never a time when Christians did not celebrate the Lord's Supper "in his name." The Apostles, spreading the *kerygma* of the Resurrection, established everywhere local communities, where Christ could be present sacramentally among those gathered in his Name. St. Ignatius of Antioch called each of these communities the "Catholic Church," (*Smyrn.* VIII, 2), i.e., a church in which the fulness of the undivided Body is present, which is headed

by a bishop, the image of God, and the presbyters representing the apostolic college.

This is still the very foundation of Orthodox ecclesiology today. The concept of "Body of Christ" is to be applied to the sacramental, or eucharistic aspect of the Church, to that which makes the Church to be the Church, and not to be its necessary but changeable organizational, administrative, or juridical superstructure.

Of course, the local sacramental communities—our "dioceses"—need unity among themselves. Together, they constitute the universal Church. But this unity is realized in their common witness to the *one faith*, not through an extra-sacramental institutional criterion. The unity of the Church is a divine, not a human, organizational unity, and it is *faith* which is our connection with God: only *in the faith*, do the various institutions of the Church—and indeed the sacraments themselves—have any efficacy or meaning. Common faith, therefore, creates common, unifying institutions and primacies, and not the reverse.

It is not difficult to realize that here lies the major ecclesiological issue between Rome and Orthodoxy. It is the issue of a juridical, visible criterion of truth to which all local churches must submit. Throughout its early history, as an Orthodox historian sees it, the Church has been many times divided: controversies lasted for centuries, councils and pseudo-councils met to solve the problems and issue doctrinal formulae. All these conflicts, however, were solved by common agreement of all the Churches in the one faith. Individual churches may have had more authority than others, but their qualifications for such a major authority had lain in the personality of their bishops, in the political importance of the cities, in the theological tradition which they represented, not in any divine institution. Rome, indeed, always enjoyed the first place of authority among the churches, but only a purely Western doctrinal development could have led to the idea that the Church of Rome is the last resort of all issues and the *criterion* of all truth.

In fact, it was the search for such a criterion, a search for *security* which was the major motive in the development of medieval papacy, and it eventually led to the definition of papal infallibility

and of an immediate and episcopal jurisdiction of the pope over all the faithful in 1870. Thus, the primitive concept of consensus in the faith was replaced with a direct doctrinal and disciplinary leadership of one Vicar of Christ. This development was faced, in the West, by a whole series of reactions—the conciliar movement, the Reformation, modern liberalism and secularism—but in most cases another visible criterion was opposed to the Roman one: the Council, as a sort of ecclesiastical Parliament, or the Bible, as the only source of revelation.

In the face of all of these developments, the deepest intuition of Orthodoxy lies precisely in the conviction that Divine Truth does not need any criterion to be true. The Councils themselves do not *decide* what is the truth, they *witness* to it. God alone, dwelling in the Church, is the unique source of knowledge about God, and the Holy Spirit leads the holy Church in all truth. You may call this conception mystical, but the word must be used with care. For Christian faith is not an individualistic faith: it becomes real only in the organic and sacramental unity of the Church. It certainly implies a *personal* commitment, but not that of an isolated person: the Christian knows Christ when he is part of his Body. And the Body has its own structure, based upon its sacramental nature. The apostolic succession of the episcopate, in each local church, is the responsible bearer of the apostolic tradition, and it receives, as St. Irenaeus writes, "a certain charisma of truth" (*Adversus haereses*, IV, 11, 2). But bishops are in no way infallible personally; they are *responsible* in a particular and eminent way for the Church's continuity in faith and sacraments, just as any layman is also responsible, in his own place, for the life of the Body.

It is my deep conviction that our present-day dialogue will bring forth fruit only if it handles this ecclesiological issue very seriously. One of the temptations of our ecumenical age is to become pragmatic and superficial. Many believe that our unity can simply be brought about by a few liturgical and canonical adjustments. But such an attitude may ultimately bring disillusion and actually harm the ecumenical movement. I do not want at all to be pessimistic.

We have—Roman Catholics and Orthodox—a millennium of common tradition and as soon as we refer to it, we begin to understand each other. The momentous reign of Pope John XXIII, his understanding of some of the major issues, his desire to counter-balance, somehow, the decisions of Vatican I, and also the memorable meeting between Pope Paul and Patriarch Athenagoras change the whole atmosphere of our relations. But all these events are to be interpreted theologically, in their true spiritual, and not only emotional, dimension.

For the Orthodox, the brotherly meeting at Jerusalem means, first of all, that the Pope, for the first time in centuries, accepted to be seen by all as an equal of the other bishops, that is, to give of himself an image which comes closer to the idea that we traditionally have of the Bishop of Rome; that of the elder brother. If this image is somehow preserved in the decisions of the Council, a great step forward will be made. If nothing of it remains, it is probably better to avoid any doctrinal decision and wait for further results of our present-day search for the true meaning of the words "primacy" and "episcopacy" in the Church. For great harm could be done, for example, by a definition of episcopal "collegiality" which would simply envisage the universal episcopate as a *consultative* body around the pope. The historical and theological origin and foundation of the episcopate, as the body of those who *in each place* preside over the *Catholic Church*, that is the Church in its sacramental *fulness* (not a "part of the church") would, in fact, be undermined. It is a theology of the local church—"local" being understood in its sacramental, more than geographical sense—which would help further understanding between us, not simply a concept of "collegiality" on the universal scale.

It is my firm belief that it is the task of theologians to point out the real issues at stake and to help the Church avoid the many side issues that occupy us. Fortunately, theology, as a science, has never really ceased to be ecumenical. We all read each other's books and profit from them whether the general atmosphere is favorable or not to ecumenical thinking. Let us do our work patiently and responsibly—in *constant dialogue*—and leave the Spirit of God to

perform its mysterious task of nourishing and governing the entire Body of Christ's Church.

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