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The Church as Hospital for Sinners: An Ecclesiology of Grace

Abstract

This article examines the ecclesiological vision of the Church as a “hospital for sinners,” presenting a theology of grace rooted in the mystery of the Triune God and the Incarnation of the Word. The Church is understood not merely as a historical or social institution, but as the living image and manifestation of the Kingdom of God, where divine communion is offered to humanity through sacramental participation. Drawing on biblical testimony and patristic theology, the study highlights the Church’s Trinitarian foundation, emphasizing that ecclesial unity reflects the perichoretic life of the Father, Son,



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and Holy Spirit and is actualized primarily through the Eucharist. The paper further explores the Old Testament prefigurations of the Church - such as the Ark of Noah, the tabernacle, the temple, and the Exodus - as integral components of the divine economy that find their fulfillment in the ecclesial body of Christ. These typologies reveal the Church as the foreordained dwelling place of God and the vessel of salvation in history.

Central to this ecclesiology is the metaphor of the Church as a spiritual hospital, deeply rooted in Christ's self-identification as the physician of souls. Through the sacraments, ascetical life, and communal worship, the Church offers healing from the sickness of sin and guides believers toward repentance, transformation, and theosis. At the same time, the study critically addresses the limitations of the hospital metaphor, including the risks of spiritual passivity and the reality of "church hurt," arguing for a balanced ecclesiology that integrates healing with discipleship, growth, and mission. Ultimately, the Church is presented as the extension of the Incarnation in time, a divine-human communion through which grace restores humanity and prepares it for participation in eternal life.

Keywords

Ecclesiology, Church as Hospital for Sinners, Trinitarian Communion, Sacramental Healing, Grace, Theosis

1 Introduction

The Church, as a divine institution, transcends its historical and social dimensions to embody a profound mystery rooted in the life of the Triune God. The Christian ecclesiology presents the Church as both the image of the Trinity and the manifestation of God's kingdom on earth. This dual identity underscores the Church's role as a sacred space where divine communion is extended to humanity, transforming believers through

participation in the sacramental life¹. The metaphor of the Church as a “hospital for sinners” further illuminates its mission as a place of spiritual healing, where grace restores brokenness and fosters growth toward holiness, “for indeed the school of the Church is an admirable surgery — a surgery, not for bodies, but for souls. For it is spiritual, and sets right, not fleshly wounds, but errors of the mind, and of these errors and wounds the medicine is the word. This medicine is compounded, not from the herbs growing on the earth, but from the words proceeding from heaven, this no hands of physicians, but tongues of preachers have dispensed”². In this paper, we will outline the theological foundations of the Church’s identity, its prefigurations in the Old Testament, and the implications of its healing mission, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of its sacramental and communal dimensions.

At the heart of the Church’s identity is its reflection of the Triune God³. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in a perichoretic unity—a mutual indwelling that defines the divine life⁴. This unity is not abstract but is made tangible in the Church, where believers are baptized into the name of the Trinity and united

¹ “The sacraments express the pastoral ministry of the Church, which has a soteriological, ecclesiological, and eschatological character. The work of the shepherd in the Orthodox Christian tradition begins with the celebration of the sacraments.”, Basilios I. Kalliakmanis, *Pastoral Theology and Ecclesiology*, (Migdonia Publications, 2013), 26.

² John Chrysostom, *Homily Against Publishing the Errors of the Brethren*, trans by R. Blackburn. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 9*. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1913.htm>.

³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary to John’s gospel*, XIV, 20, *Patrologia Graeca*: PG 74 557A, C.

⁴ E. Artemi, “The Term Perichoresis from Cappadocian Fathers to Maximus Confessor”, *International Journal of European Studies*, 1(1) (2017), 21-29, esp. 24, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijes.20170101.14>. Danut Manastireanu, *A Perichoretic Model of the Church. The Trinitarian Ecclesiology of Dumitru Staniloae*, (Brunel University 2004), 75.

through the Eucharist. As it is emphasized, the Church is not merely an imitation of divine unity but its icon and extension in time. The sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, serve as the means by which the faithful are incorporated into the Body of Christ, sharing in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)⁵. This ontological unity transforms the Church into a living mystery, where human and divine communion intersect. With this act of Holy Eucharist, the Church reminds the world that an indestructible friendship exists between God and humanity, because of the love of Christ, who conquered evil through the offering of his own self (1 Corinthians 5:7)⁶. In this sense, the Eucharist provides the unifying power of the human race. It is also the place of that unity. The new character and meaning of the Last Supper are immediately and directly tied to the redemptive act of the cross and resurrection of the Lord.

The Old Testament provides a rich tapestry of prefigurations that foreshadow the Church's identity and mission. The Ark of Noah, the tabernacle, the temple, and the Exodus narrative all point toward the ecclesial reality fulfilled in Christ. These typologies are not mere historical artifacts but reveal the continuity of God's salvific plan⁷. For instance, the Ark symbolizes the Church as the vessel of salvation, while the temple prefigures the Church as the dwelling place of God's glory. The Exodus narrative, with its themes of liberation and covenantal journey, mirrors the baptismal passage from death to life. These images collectively underscore that the Church is the *telos* of God's revelation, where promises are fulfilled, and divine presence is fully realized⁸.

⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *There is one Christ*, Sources Chrétiennes: SC 97, 77633-42 (=PG 75, 1360A). John 6:51-52.

⁶ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Expositio divinæ liturgiæ*, 32, 10: SC 4bis, 205.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Algernon James Pollock, "The Church of God", ch. 1, <https://bibletruthpublishers.com/algernon-james-pollock/the-church-of-god/a-j-pollock/lub56-15110> (Accessed 1 June 2025)

Central to the Church's mission is its role as a "hospital for sinners." This metaphor, though not explicitly biblical, is deeply rooted in Christ's ministry. Jesus' declaration that He came not for the righteous but for sinners (Luke 5:31-32) encapsulates the Church's therapeutic purpose. The early Christians institutionalized this mission by establishing hospitals, reflecting their commitment to holistic healing. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Church is likened to a clinic where sacraments, ascetical practices, and communal life serve as remedies for soul-sickness⁹. Confession and the Eucharist act as diagnostic and therapeutic tools, administered by clergy who function as spiritual physicians. This model challenges nominal Christianity, emphasizing that doctrine must lead to transformative healing¹⁰.

However, the hospital metaphor is not without limitations. Critics argue that it may foster spiritual passivity or neglect the Church's call to maturity and mission. Complementary images, such as the Church as a body, a temple, or an army, balance the focus on healing with growth and service. The Church is not merely a refuge¹¹ for the wounded but a training ground for discipleship, where the healed become healers. This dynamic reflects the eschatological tension of the Church, which is both a foretaste of the kingdom and a pilgrim community journeying toward fullness. The church is what the Word of God says it is.

⁹ Ioannes N Karmires,. "Ecclesiology." In *Religious and Ethical Encyclopedia*, 5th edition, (Athens, 1964), 556.

¹⁰ Thomas Fitzgerald, "The Holy Eucharist". Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, (2014) Webpage with the title Our Faith. <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith7077>. (Accessed 2 June 2025)

¹¹ "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit", Ephesians 2:19-22.

The identity of a church is extrinsically bestowed, not by us or by the events of a church, but by the King of the church, Jesus. Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock [the confession of Peter] I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:16-18).

The challenge of “church hurt” further complicates the hospital analogy. When the Church fails to embody Christ’s compassion, it inflicts wounds rather than healing them. This betrayal underscores the need for authenticity, humility, and accountability within Christian communities. True healing requires a culture of grace and truth, where sin is confronted with love and restoration is pursued relentlessly¹².

In summary, the ecclesiology presents the Church as a divine-human communion, a continuation of the mystery of the Incarnation. Its identity as the image of the Trinity, its fulfillment of Old Testament typologies, and its mission of healing collectively reveal a vision of the Church that is both transcendent and immanent. As we delve deeper into these themes, we will explore how the Church’s sacramental life, its balance of grace and discipline, and its eschatological hope shape its vocation in the world. This exploration invites believers to embrace their role in the Body of Christ, participating in the divine life and extending its healing to a broken world.

2 The Church as Image and Kingdom of the Triune God

The Church is not a mere social or historical construct, but a living mystery grounded in the eternal being of the Triune God.

¹² Jehu Gyimah, *Understanding the Sources of Hurt and Wounded Members in the Church of Pentecost Norfolk*, doctorate thesis (Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity, 2023), 45, 60.

It proceeds from the divine communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and exists to manifest and extend this communion within history. The Church is both the *image* of God's life and the visible expression of His *kingdom*¹³. Its nature, purpose, and unity are inseparable from the mystery of the Trinity.

At the heart of this reality lies the understanding that the Father is the unbegotten source and principle of the Godhead. All divine being flows from Him, not by division or temporal generation, but through eternal relationships that preserve unity and distinction simultaneously¹⁴. "From the Father," it is said, "every good and perfect gift comes, descending from the Father of lights." The Son is begotten eternally from the essence of the Father, not by division or separation, but "as one from one, always coexisting and coeternal, embedded within the One who begets Him and from whom He proceeds indivisibly." The Spirit, too, proceeds from the Father, "being poured forth as from a source and granted to creation through the Son." Thus, while each Person is distinct, all are consubstantial, sharing a single, undivided essence.

This mystery of divine life is not an inaccessible abstraction but forms the basis of ecclesial existence¹⁵. The Church, composed of those baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not only called to reflect divine unity but is shaped by it. "The essential unity which the Son has with the Father, He desires to

¹³ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Westminster Press, 1960), 30.

¹⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian's Impiety in Defense of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, SC 322, 452–454 (=PG 76, 552A): "...transcending all intellect and reason, incomprehensible, without form, life-giving, the source of all things, unbegotten, incorruptible, and the creator of all existence..."

¹⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John, Prologue*, Pusey, vol. I, pp. 65–66 (=PG 73, 16A). "The divine mystery is and remains a mystery; only partial knowledge of it is possible. Insistence on absolute knowledge or deep investigation of it leads rather to a dead end, as its depth continually expands.", Ch. Sotiropoulos, *Comparative Analysis of Mystagogical Texts* (Athens 1994), 8.

extend to us, binding us to one another in a likeness of the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity, so that the whole body of the Church may be understood as one.” This unity is not superficial or moral alone, but sacramental and ontological. It is through participation in the sacraments - above all the Eucharist - that believers are joined together into one body and drawn into communion with God.

The Church, therefore, exists not only in imitation of the Trinity but as its image and extension in time. When Christ declares, “Upon this rock I will build my Church,” the possessive “my” is not to be understood in a merely personal sense, but as inclusive of the tri-personal Godhead. The Church belongs to God not as an external creation but as an inward reflection of divine life, instituted in time to gather creation into Trinitarian communion. It is the place where the divine is encountered, the kingdom of God manifested among humanity¹⁶.

This identification of the Church with the kingdom does not reduce the eschatological to the present, nor does it defer the present to the future. The kingdom of God, though awaited in fullness, is already present wherever Christ is known, where the Spirit sanctifies, and where the Father is glorified. The Church offers, within time, a foretaste of eternal glory. In it, “we are united with each other and all with God,” through the Spirit who seals the faithful and leads them into incorruptibility. Thus, the

¹⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary to John's gospel*, XIV, 20, *Patrologia Graeca*: PG 74 557A, C: "Christ, having assumed the essential unity which the Father has toward Him—and which He, in turn, has toward the Father—wills, in a certain manner, that we too be intermingled with one another, clearly in the power of the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity, insofar as the entire body of the Church is understood as one. In what has already been stated, we have not unreasonably affirmed that the concordant and like-minded union of believers ought to imitate the mode of divine unity, the essential identity of the Holy Trinity, and their complete mutual interpenetration (*perichōrēsis*). But now, in what follows, we are eager to show that this unity is in some sense also natural—according to which we are united both to one another and all together to God."

kingdom is not merely coming - it is *given, tasted, and lived* in the Church.

What undergirds this theological vision is the mystery of *perichoresis* - the mutual indwelling of the divine Persons. “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” Such a statement reveals the impossibility of separation within the divine life. One cannot behold the Son without beholding the Father. “All that the Father has is mine, and all mine is his” (John 16:15). The mutual possession among the divine Persons is complete and unconfused. This perichoretic unity becomes the model and goal of ecclesial life: that believers may “be one, as we are one.”¹⁷

In the same way that the Son is the “unchanging image and form of the Father,” fully possessing the divine nature, the Church too becomes a kind of image—not of essence, but of communion. The faithful, through love, humility, and shared faith, are drawn into a unity that reflects, however imperfectly, the interpenetrating love of the divine Persons. This unity is not imposed from without but springs from within the life of the Spirit. The Spirit, “God by nature, from God and in God,” is not a creature or product of time but the very bond of peace, granted by the Son from the Father to creation¹⁸.

Thus, the Church becomes both the icon and the vehicle of divine life. In it, the human is sanctified, the earthly lifted into heaven,

¹⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus*, PG 75, 357A–B. Idem, *On the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity*, Book V, SC 237, §54–§49 (= PG 75, 944C): “If the Son is the unchangeable image of the Father, such that the Father is seen in Him—according to the saying, ‘He who has seen Me has seen the Father’—then it is necessary to affirm that He who proceeds from the Unbegotten Father is Himself unbegotten.”. Also, cf Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus*, PG 75, 25A (John 15:9). Idem, *On the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity*, Book II, SC 231, §45–§31 (= PG 75, 772D–773B).

¹⁸ Nikolaos Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*, vol. II: *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith in Contrast with Western Christianity*, Philosophical and Theological Library 3 (P. Pournaras Editions, 2001), 137, 154.

and time touched by eternity. The life of the Trinity is not abstracted from the world but is offered to the world through the Church. The Church does not merely represent God; it becomes, by grace, the space where God dwells among His people. In its liturgy, sacraments, and communion, the uncreated light of the divine glory shines forth, and the faithful are conformed to the image of the Son¹⁹.

In this way, the Church stands as both image and kingdom—an icon of divine unity and the dwelling place of God with humanity. It is not merely a symbol of the Triune God but His extension and presence within time. Through the Church, the mystery of the Trinity is made visible, accessible, and transformative. It is the earthly manifestation of heavenly reality, where human beings, through faith and sacrament, participate in the eternal life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

3 The Church and Its Prefigurations in the Old Testament

The mystery of the Church is deeply foreshadowed in the symbols, narratives, and institutions of the Old Testament. These prefigurations do not exist merely as theological curiosities, but as part of the divine pedagogy through which the Holy Spirit gradually revealed the mystery of salvation culminating in Christ and His Body, the Church²⁰. According to biblical interpretation preserved in early patristic commentaries, the Old Testament is not abolished but fulfilled in the ecclesial reality established by the incarnate Word²¹. The events, objects, and structures of the

¹⁹ Norman Russel, «The Church in the commentaries of St. Cyril of Alexandria», *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 7:2 (2007), 70-85, esp. 77, DOI:10.1080/14742250701256138.

²⁰ Eirini. Artemi, *Isidore's of Pelusium teaching for the Triune God and its relation to the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria*, in greek, (Athens 2012), 304.

²¹ Arthur H. Armstrong, "Platonic Elements in St. Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Man", *Dominica Studies* 1 (1948), 114. Konstantinos E.

ancient covenant point forward to the Church, revealing her identity and role as the dwelling place of God among His people. One of the most prominent figures of the Old Testament that prefigures the Church is the Ark of Noah. This vessel, which carried the righteous through the flood to a new creation, serves as a type of the Church that preserves humanity from the waters of destruction and delivers it to the safety of communion with God. Just as those within the Ark were saved while those outside perished, so too salvation is found in the Church, the ark of the new covenant, established through the water and Spirit of baptism, the righteousness that was attributed to Noah arose from his faith and the obedience that came alongside it. The blameless Ark builder was saved, not because he earned a place on the Ark, but because he trusted his Creator. In the very same manner, members of the invisible Church, those who characterize, by their faithfulness, the Church as the “gathering of believers,” are saved in accordance with their genuine faith and trust in Christ. They are reckoned as righteous by faith alone; Christ’s righteousness is imputed to them, and they are given grace to stand in the judgment of God (1 Peter 3:20-21).

The tabernacle and the temple are also powerful prefigurations of the Church. These sacred spaces, constructed by divine command and filled with the presence of God, signify the Church as the dwelling place of the divine glory²². The Most Holy Place, into which only the high priest could enter once a year, points to the inner sanctum of the Church—the Eucharistic mystery—wherein the faithful encounter God face to face through the body and blood of Christ. The golden lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table of showbread all become spiritual symbols that find their fulfillment in the ecclesial life and the divine liturgy²³.

Papapetrou, *The Revelation of God and the Knowledge of Him*, in greek, (Athens 1969), 65. Konstantinos B. Scouteris, "Incarnation and Theosis", *Efimerios*, vol 12, (December 1999), 19.

²² Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary to John's gospel*, 4, PG 73, 620D-621B.

²³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary to John's gospel*, 4, PG 73, 580B-D..

The exodus of Israel from Egypt and the passage through the Red Sea prefigure the baptismal journey of the faithful, a transition from slavery to freedom, from death to life. The sea becomes a womb from which a new people emerge, consecrated by divine grace. The desert pilgrimage becomes an image of the Church's journey through history, nourished by the manna from heaven and the water from the rock—both of which are identified with Christ Himself. The ecclesial community, like Old Israel, walks in covenantal fidelity, sustained by divine gifts until it reaches the promised land of the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

Figures such as the Ark of the Covenant, which held the tablets of the Law, the rod of Aaron, and the manna, also foreshadow the Church as the vessel of divine revelation and communion. Within her are preserved the teaching of Christ (the new Law), the apostolic authority (the rod), and the heavenly sustenance (the Eucharist). The liturgical and priestly order of the Levitical ministry finds its fulfillment in the Church's sacramental life, where Christ is both high priest and sacrificial victim, and the faithful are made a royal priesthood.

The Old Testament's imagery of vine and vineyard also finds new meaning in the ecclesial context. Israel was called the Lord's vineyard, but its failure to bear fruit led to judgment. In the fullness of time, the true vine appears, and those grafted into Him by faith and baptism become fruitful branches (1 Corinthians 10:1-2). The Church, as the vineyard of the Lord, is a cultivated space wherein the life of grace matures and bears spiritual fruit through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 20:1).

Likewise, the covenantal assembly at Sinai foreshadows the Church as the new Israel. As the people gathered at the foot of the mountain and received the Law, so now the Church gathers at the foot of the heavenly Mount Zion, receiving the Gospel and the outpouring of the Spirit. This new assembly transcends ethnicity and geography, comprising all who call upon the name of the Lord and are sealed by the Spirit (1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

Throughout these images, what emerges is a theological continuity between the two Testaments, rooted in divine economy. The Old anticipates the New, and the New fulfills the Old, without rupture. The Church is not a human invention or a postscript to salvation history, but the foreordained mystery hidden in figures and shadows, now revealed in the fullness of time. The divine plan unfolds not as discontinuity but as consummation, where what was once veiled becomes manifest, and what was once symbolized becomes sacramentally real. Florofsky underlines: "The Old Covenant was not destroyed by Christ, but renewed and accomplished. In this sense Christianity was not a new religion, but rather the oldest. The new Christian "Scriptures" were simply incorporated into the inherited Hebrew Bible as its organic completion. And only the whole Bible, both Testaments together, was regarded as an adequate record of Christian Revelation. There was no break between the two Testaments, but a unity of Divine economy"²⁴.

Thus, the Church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's prefigurations, the reality toward which all the types and shadows were directed. In her, the promises are fulfilled, the Law is internalized, and the presence of God is no longer confined to stone or tent, but dwells within the gathered faithful, constituting a living temple through the Spirit. The prefigurations of old do not merely teach us about the past; they unveil the profound mystery of the Church as God's eternal purpose, revealed in history and accomplished in Christ.

4 The mystery of the Church cannot be isolated from the mystery of the Incarnate Word.

The unity between Christ and His Church emerges as an ontological and unbreakable bond, not merely symbolic or

²⁴ George Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, Vol. IV, (Nordland publishing Company Belmont, 1975), 32.

external. The Church is not an external society or moral association, but the spiritual Body of the incarnate Logos, through which the faithful participate in divine life. This participation is real, transformative, and rooted in the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ²⁵.

According to the exegetical tradition preserved in patristic works, the unity between Christ and the Church originates from the very act of the Incarnation. The Word did not merely assume human nature; He assumed it in such a way that He united it inseparably to Himself, thereby sanctifying and deifying it. Consequently, all those who are incorporated into Christ through baptism and the Eucharist participate in that same sanctified and deified humanity. This ecclesial unity is not moral or external but a sacramental and ontological one, founded on the Eucharistic communion, which is the real participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord²⁶.

In interpreting scriptural passages, the theological vision presented in the patristic corpus emphasizes that Christ, in becoming man, united all humanity to Himself. He offered Himself as the bread of life, so that those who partake of Him might no longer live in themselves but in Him, and He in them. This mutual indwelling—Christ in us and we in Christ—is the very content of ecclesial life. The Church, therefore, is the space of divine-human communion, where the faithful are not merely called to believe in Christ but to live in Him and become by grace what He is by nature²⁷.

²⁵ Demetrios Tselengidis, *Presuppositions and Criteria of Orthodox and Inerrant Theology: Theological and Ecclesiological Approaches*, (P. Pournaras Publications, 2013), 25-32. Amfilohije (Radović) Jevtić, *The Ecclesiology of the Apostle Paul*, (Grigoris Publications, 1984), 37.

²⁶ Tselengidis, *Presuppositions and Criteria of Orthodox and Inerrant Theology*, 43. Amfilohije (Radović), *The Ecclesiology of the Apostle Paul*, 48.

²⁷ Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, Vol. IV, 49.

This vision is further reinforced by the understanding of the Holy Spirit's role, who, after Pentecost, actualizes the mystery of the Incarnate Word within the Church. The Spirit is not a distant power but the very breath of life in the ecclesial body, uniting the members to their Head and guiding them toward the fullness of truth. The indwelling of the Spirit is thus inseparable from the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist, where the faithful are mystically yet truly incorporated into the glorified Body of Christ²⁸.

Hence, ecclesial unity is Trinitarian in character: it reflects the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Church, as the body of Christ, is animated by the Spirit and directed toward the Father. Its unity is not institutional but ontological, grounded in the mystery of divine life shared with humanity. The liturgical and sacramental life is the visible and tangible expression of this inner mystery, a participation in the divine life through communion with the incarnate and risen Christ.

Moreover, the Church is eschatological. It transcends time while being present within it. It already participates in the life of the age to come through the sacramental presence of the glorified Lord. The Eucharist is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and the Church on earth is the icon of the Kingdom. Yet, this participation remains dynamic and anticipatory; it calls the faithful to a continuous movement toward deification, theosis, through life in Christ²⁹.

In this vision, the faithful are not mere individuals gathered around a common belief or ritual, but members of one body, organically united with Christ and with one another. This unity is real and mystical, grounded in love, faith, and sacramental participation. The Church is thus not a human construction but the extension of the Incarnation in time, the place where the

²⁸ Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*, vol. II, 187

²⁹ Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, Vol. IV, 99.

saving economy of God is actualized and where humanity is continually renewed and divinized.³⁰

In conclusion, the Church is the mystery of Christ extended in space and time. It is the communion of the faithful in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord, animated by the Spirit, and directed toward the Father. This ecclesial mystery is not grasped merely by intellectual analysis but lived within the sacramental and liturgical life. It is a mystery that invites each believer into the heart of divine love, where the Word made flesh continues to dwell among His people, sanctifying them and making them one with Himself.

5 The Church as a Hospital for Sinners: An Ecclesiology of Grace

The metaphor of the Church as a "hospital for sinners" has resonated deeply within Christian thought across traditions and centuries. This powerful image captures the essence of the Church's mission as a place of spiritual healing, where broken and wounded souls find restoration through God's grace. While the analogy is not explicitly biblical, its theological foundations are rooted in Christ's ministry to the sick and sinful³¹, and it has been developed by Church Fathers like Augustine and Chrysostom. This ecclesiology of grace presents the Church not as an institution for the perfect but as a sanctuary where transformation occurs through divine mercy. However, as we shall explore, this metaphor also raises important questions about spiritual growth, discipline, and the balance between grace and truth in the Christian community.

³⁰ Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, Vol. IV, 331-327.

³¹ Hadley Robinson, "The Church as the hospital for the sinners", n.d. <https://www.hadleyrobinson.com/theology-hr/churchhosp.htm>, Accessed 22 June 2025

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges his audience not to identify others as neighbors to love, but instead to become merciful neighbors themselves—those who act compassionately toward others.

From the early Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria (circa 150–215), Origen (circa 184–254), Ambrose (339–390), and Augustine (354–430), the parable has been consistently read as a symbolic account of divine compassion and the story of human salvation. Later Christian thinkers, including the Venerable Bede (673–735) and Martin Luther (1483–1546), continued to engage with this interpretation, each bringing their own perspectives while preserving the core message: the parable encapsulates the heart of the Gospel. It illustrates what Christ has done for humanity and calls believers to replicate His mercy through their own lives³².

Thus, the Parable of the Good Samaritan transcends the role of a simple ethical teaching. It is, more significantly, a theological narrative that speaks to Christ's salvific mission and serves as an invitation to follow in His footsteps.

To better grasp the central role of Christ within this parable—particularly as it relates to the modern ecclesial image of the Church as a "field hospital"—James F. Keenan's allegorical interpretation offers critical insights. Drawing upon classical exegetical methods, Keenan frames the parable within a broader theological context. His interpretation underlines that the injured man represents Adam, cast out of Eden and wounded by sin, standing in for all of fallen humanity. The priest and the Levite, symbolizing the Mosaic Law and the prophetic tradition, are unable to provide the healing that Adam needs. Then appears the Good Samaritan, who is understood as Christ—an outsider to this world—who tends to the wounded man, representing the healing power of salvation. He then transports him to an inn,

³² Peter Walusimbi, *The image of the Church as a (field) hospital in st. Augustine and Pope Francis*, (University of Saint Mary of the Lake 2022), 5.

which signifies the Church. There, the Samaritan leaves two denarii as a deposit—symbolizing the two great commandments of love—and entrusts the care of the man to the innkeeper, interpreted as St. Paul. Finally, the Samaritan pledges to return, an allusion to the Second Coming, when full redemption will be granted, and the healed will be brought into the eternal Kingdom (the eschatological fulfillment)³³.

This allegorical interpretation not only sheds light on humanity's fallen condition and the redemptive work of Christ but also affirms the Church's vision as a place of spiritual healing. In this reading, the Church emerges as a sanctuary of mercy and restoration—rooted in the redemptive love of Christ and oriented toward the eschatological hope of final restoration.

5.1 Biblical Foundations of the Hospital Analogy

The scriptural basis for viewing the Church as a hospital emerges from Christ's self-identification as a physician. In Luke 5:31-32, Jesus declares, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." This statement, made in response to criticism for eating with tax collectors and sinners, reveals the heart of His mission. Jeremiah's lament (8:22) about the lack of healing for God's people finds its answer in Christ, the Great Physician who provides the balm for humanity's deepest wounds through His atoning sacrifice.

The early Church recognized this healing dimension of Christian community. As Jacob Prahlow notes in "A Place of Hope and Healing," while the word "hospital" didn't exist in biblical times, it was fourth-century Christians who first developed the concept—creating places (from *hospes* and *patior*) where guests could be cared for in their suffering. This institutional development flowed naturally from seeing Christ's healing

³³ James F. Keenan, "The Scandal of Mercy," *Zeitschrift Für Katholische Theologie* 138, no. 3/4 (2016): 277-288, Accessed June 22, 2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44651450>, esp., 282-283.

ministry as the model for the Church's work. The sacraments, particularly Eucharist and Confession, became the medicines administered in this spiritual infirmary, with clergy serving as Christ's medical attendants rather than the primary healers.

5.2 The Therapeutic Nature of the Church

Eastern Orthodox theology has particularly emphasized the Church's therapeutic role. Fr. Emmanuel Hatzidakis describes the Orthodox view of the Church as "a spiritual hospital, a clinic, a hospice, a therapeutic center, and a fitness center—all combined in one!" This comprehensive approach addresses the whole person—spiritual, emotional, material, and intellectual—restoring broken lives to communion with God and others. The Church offers diagnosis (through the examination of conscience and confession), treatment (through the sacraments and ascetical practices), and rehabilitation (through the virtues and community life).

Fr. John Romanides' insight, quoted by Hatzidakis, challenges nominal Christianity: "What good is doctrine when it is not used to heal?" Mere intellectual assent to Christian teaching without transformative application leaves believers no different spiritually than adherents of other religions. The Orthodox tradition thus emphasizes noetic prayer and purification of the heart as evidence of authentic healing. The extensive lists of virtues and vices in Orthodox writings resemble medical charts detailing symptoms of soul-sickness and markers of wellness.

5.3 Grace and the Problem of Sin

At the heart of the hospital metaphor is a theology of grace that welcomes sinners without condoning sin. As the blog "Seeing God" articulates, the Church must balance truth (acknowledging sin's reality and damage) with grace (offering love and a better path). This tension mirrors Christ's ministry—full of compassion for sinners yet uncompromising in calling them to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

The hospital analogy powerfully counters the tendency to view the Church as "a museum for saints"—a place where only the spiritually polished belong. Jesus' harsh words against the Pharisees (Matthew 23:27-28) condemn religious performance that masks inner brokenness. In contrast, the hospital model creates space for vulnerability, where, as Prahlow observes, "We don't hide our sin or sinful nature, but instead we support each other and pray for one another." James 5:16's instruction to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" becomes the operational principle of this ecclesiology.

5.4 Limitations and Complementary Analogies

While the hospital metaphor offers profound insights, some theologians caution against overemphasis. The analogy's potential weaknesses may encourage spiritual passivity, neglect the Church's call to maturity (Hebrews 5:12-14), and fail to address what happens when patients are "cured." If the Church only ministers to the chronically ill, where do the healed serve? Some scholars prefer military or agricultural metaphors that emphasize growth and mission.

These concerns highlight the need for complementary ecclesiological images. Scripture describes the Church as a body (1 Corinthians 12), a temple (1 Peter 2:5), a flock (John 10), and a bride (Revelation 19:7), each emphasizing different aspects of Christian community. The military analogy (2 Timothy 2:3-4) underscores discipline and warfare against spiritual forces, while agricultural images (John 15:1-8) highlight growth and fruitfulness. A robust ecclesiology integrates these perspectives, recognizing that healing is not an end in itself but prepares believers for service and witness.

5.5 The Challenge of Church Hurt

A painful reality complicating the hospital metaphor is when the Church itself becomes a source of injury. Prahlow shares his

traumatic experience of church conflict where "people who claimed to be full of God's love could be so full of hatred." Such "church hurt" represents a profound betrayal of the healing mission, turning what should be a place of refuge into a source of trauma. This underscores that the hospital model requires congregations to embody Christ's compassion authentically, guarding against hypocrisy, abuse of power, and exclusionary practices.

5.6 A Community of Wounded Healers

The Church as hospital ultimately finds its identity in Christ, the Physician who heals through His wounds (Isaiah 53:5). This ecclesiology of grace acknowledges universal brokenness while offering hope for transformation. As St. John Chrysostom proclaimed, "The Church is a hospital, and not a courtroom, for souls. She does not condemn on behalf of sins, but grants remission of sins." Yet true healing always moves patients toward health—equipping them to become healers themselves. In this vision, the Church fulfills its calling when sinners, restored by grace, join Christ's healing work in the world.

Conclusions

The ecclesiology of grace articulated in *The Church as Hospital for Sinners* offers a compelling vision of the Church as both a divine mystery and a transformative community. Dr. Eirini Artemi's work underscores that the Church's identity is irrevocably tied to the life of the Triune God, its mission rooted in Christ's healing ministry, and its purpose directed toward the deification of humanity. As we conclude this exploration, it is essential to synthesize the key themes, reflect on their implications for contemporary ecclesial practice, and consider the enduring relevance of the Church's healing vocation.

The Church's foundation in the Trinity provides the theological bedrock for its unity and mission. The perichoretic love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the model for ecclesial

communion, in which believers are drawn into a sacramental and ontological participation. This unity is actualized through the Eucharist, which binds the faithful to Christ and to one another, making the Church a living icon of divine life. The sacraments are not mere rituals but channels of grace, effecting the real transformation of persons. This understanding challenges reductionist views of the Church as a mere human institution or social organization, reaffirming its divine origin and destiny.

The Old Testament prefigurations of the Church reveal the coherence of salvation history. From the Ark of Noah to the temple, these typologies demonstrate that the Church is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan. The continuity between the covenants highlights that the Church is not an afterthought but the culmination of divine revelation. This theological continuity invites believers to appreciate the depth of their ecclesial identity, seeing themselves as part of a story that spans creation, redemption, and consummation.

The metaphor of the Church as a hospital for sinners captures the heart of its mission. Christ, the Great Physician, ministers to the broken through the Church, offering the balm of grace and the medicine of immortality in the sacraments. This model emphasizes that the Church is a place of refuge and restoration, where sinners are welcomed without condemnation but also called to repentance and growth. The therapeutic role of the Church, particularly emphasized in Eastern Orthodox theology, provides a holistic approach to spiritual health that addresses the intellect, will, and emotions. Yet, as discussed, this metaphor must be balanced with other biblical images—such as the body, the army, or the bride—to ensure a robust ecclesiology that encompasses healing, mission, and eschatological hope.

The challenge of “church hurt” serves as a sobering reminder of the gap between the Church's ideal and its earthly reality. When the Church fails to embody the compassion of Christ, it betrays its healing vocation. Addressing this requires a commitment to transparency, accountability, and a culture of grace. Leaders

must model humility, and communities must foster environments where vulnerability is met with love, not judgment. Only then can the Church truly function as a hospital for the soul.

In light of these themes, the Church's mission today must be one of both proclamation and demonstration. It is called to proclaim the Gospel of grace, offering forgiveness and transformation through Christ. Simultaneously, it must demonstrate this Gospel by being a community where love, justice, and mercy are tangible realities. This dual mission is urgent in a world marked by brokenness, alienation, and despair. The Church, as the bearer of divine life, has the resources to meet these needs, but only if it remains faithful to its identity and calling.

Ultimately, the Church is a foretaste of the kingdom, a sign of God's reign already present but not yet fully realized. Its sacramental life points to the eschatological banquet, where healing will be complete and communion unbroken. Until then, the Church journeys as a pilgrim people, bearing witness to the transformative power of grace. The ecclesiology invites believers to embrace this vision, living as wounded healers who extend Christ's love to a hurting world.

In conclusion, the Church as a hospital for sinners is not merely an analogy but a reality grounded in the Incarnation and energized by the Holy Spirit. Its life is one of grace, its mission one of healing, and its hope one of glory. As members of this sacred community, believers are called to participate fully in its divine life, becoming instruments of God's healing and heralds of His kingdom. This is the enduring promise and challenge of the Church's ecclesiology of grace.

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