

John Anthony McGuckin

The Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Imperative

Abstract

The Orthodox Church has a specific approach to Ecumenism because of its genuine understanding of Ekklesia. The Church is not simply a bureaucratic institution but first of all a mystery of 'life in Christ', the extended power of Christ's saving work, an eschatological mystery with a transcendental destiny. The Church is the organic and extended body of Christ and the divine mystery of renovation by the power of the Holy Trinity.

The article focuses on the following topics: the Church's self-knowledge, the Church in the Credal definition, the Eucharistic typology of the Church as Icon of Christ, and finally the Church in the typology of the Divine Trinity.

As icon of the Holy Trinity on earth is the Church a mystery of Koinonia. Through the Church we can get access to Metousia, i.e. to the participation in the kenotic, liberating, unifying, and transforming communion of the Holy Trinity. This pneumatological communion by the Holy Spirit involves an "ecumenical imperative" that can be understood as a mystical responsibility of "consilience into union" in our world.

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1 Preliminaries - The Concept of the Church

I would like, this evening¹ to offer you a few observations on the Orthodox Church's approach to the contemporary ecumenical scene. But before we can review where we stand on ecumenical matters we first, perhaps, have to address a more fundamental question and renew the articulation of our concept of Church; for the very notion of ecumenical depends on the extension of the conception of the sense of Christian *Ekklesia* as a form of recognition of solidarity; and if we are not in agreement on the basics, the solidarity that we mutually offer (or refuse to offer for that matter – for there are many enemies of the ecumenical movement active today) can at best be a superficial phenomenon, which may, in the end fail to engage us with a sense of imperative.

Today we live in a world where the very idea of Church has become massively bureaucratized. The Church is widely seen as a stuffy institution run by people who are deeply out of touch, and perhaps concerned in a sinister way with preserving their status or the health of their bank accounts. Now I am not sure who these people really are: my bank balance, for one, has not been greatly improved by the Church – but nevertheless I am speaking of media driven perceptions. This is the dust that lies on our windows. It hinders not only the access of the outsiders to the springs of what the church has to offer, but it can also scandalize the believer, and weaken their progress into what the Church really means. The widespread image of the church created in western media, has become such a stumbling block for many young people's initiation into Church life, by which I mean first and foremost their deepening admission into prophetic awareness, through the hearing of scripture, by the Mystagogy of the sacraments, and the ongoing maturation of their life of prayer. Matters of organisation are significant for the Church in history, of course; its structures of officers and liturgies and canons, is part and parcel of its accumulation of experience as it has made a long historical pilgrimage. But in the heart and the core, the Church is far more than the canonical rules

¹ Given as an invited Keynote Lecture to the Toronto Schools of Theology on the occasion of their anniversary of founding, in April. 2010.

that describe it and the institutions which exemplify it. The prophet Hermas, a leader in the ancient Roman church, described the *Ekklesia*, in his visions², as bearing at once the features of an old woman and a young virgin. And so it is with the mystery of *Ekklesia* to this day. Those who denounce it, often from the outside, as a withered old crone, perhaps have failed to see (and of course to have personally experienced) the powerful currents of its virginal energy and graciousness.

A profoundly more dynamic understanding of church than bureaucracy can be found in the scriptures. These describe the *Ekklesia* as a mystery of the 'life in Christ'; a society of believers, certainly, but more fundamentally, the extended power of Christ's saving work as manifested and hypostatized, that is concretised, in the world and in the next age³. The Church, rooted as it is in this age, yet moving already out of it to its transcendent destiny with the glorified Christ, is in its essence an eschatological mystery which, although rooted around, cannot entirely be at home in, the present world order, and thus cannot be entirely glimpsed within it. This (and not only the hostility of anti-Christian media for example) is one chief reason why the Church cannot be properly comprehended by the world in which it lives, and which it seeks to renew. The scriptures prefer to come at this mystery of renovation (what we might call the full depth of the experience of Christ's salvation and the Spirit's communion of grace) through a whole variety of metaphors and similes. Taken together a rich and deeply suggestive understanding of the church as a *dynamis* emerges from them. Accordingly Christ's church can be understood as an organic and extended body⁴, a vineyard where the vinedresser keeps the stock nurtured and productive⁵, a flock of sheep under the care of a good shepherd⁶, a household bonded together⁷, the energy of spousal love⁸ or even a project under construction with foundations and cornerstones.⁹ Let me press this general biblical picture now to a more precise iteration, in a brief setting out of what the Orthodox regard as constitutive elements of ecclesiology. I would like to offer this synopsis of what the Orthodox mean by Church under four headings: the Church's self knowledge; the Church in the Credal definition; the

² Written in the late First Century, and entitled *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

³ It is precisely because the church is the body of the saved that the old aphorism took its force: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Outside the church – no salvation), though the Latin ought more accurately to be rendered: 'Outside the Church - no safety'.

⁴ Eph. 1. 22-23; Eph. 4.16.

⁵ Jn. 15. 1-8.

⁶ Jn. 10. 1-6.

⁷ Eph. 2.19; 1 Tim. 3.15; Heb. 3.6.

⁸ Eph. 5.32.

⁹ 1 Cor. 3.11; Eph. 2. 20-22;

Eucharistic typology of the Church as the Christ Icon; and finally the Church in the typology of the Divine Trinity.

2 Orthodox Ecclesiology

2.1 The Church's Self-Knowledge as its Knowledge of Christ

The scripture gives what we Orthodox call the Apostolic doctrine of the Church. Apostolic, for us, means first and foremost the teaching of the Apostles as recorded in the New Testament, and secondly, the interpretation and commentary on those truths that are demonstrably in harmony with that teaching. It is for this reason that we are able to assign apostolic status to the great saints of the church teaching universal truths, or to the great councils, or for that matter to a simple old believer alive today, whose life can be clearly affirmed as an authentic manifestation of apostolic charism and truth. Rising from this Orthodox ecclesiology, therefore, claims to be correct exegesis of the experience of the New Testament *Ekklesia*. But since the Apostolic ecclesiology speaks of the Church as *dynamis*, a power, not a static reality, this question of exegesis is not merely a semantic issue: a nit-picking over what historical conditions or translations apply and which do not. The exegesis of *Ekklesia*, if Church means primarily this experience of the renovating power of the Resurrection (the 'how' of the presence of the Holy Spirit) is equally bound to be a matter of how Orthodoxy is able to demonstrate the *energeia* or charisms that reflect the experience of that *Anastasis* in our society today.¹⁰ We need to elevate as a major axiom, therefore, that in talking about the reality of Church we are first and foremost talking of the charism of the recognition of the presence and works, the signs and grace, of the Holy Spirit of God alive in our time. This is most particularly a matter for the spiritually advanced. All humanity is moved, to some degree or other, by the Spirit of the Lord. All truth and beauty are his hallmarks. But the exegesis of the exact ways of the Spirit are not accessible to all by virtue of simple logic. They are restricted. The Lord gives knowledge of the ways of the Spirit, to those whom he has given the Spirit; and the manner in which the Elect can recognize the Spirit depends on the quality of the gift, and the manner in which the believer has allowed the gift to develop in their heart: that is in their life of ecclesial discipleship. This fundamental issue of discernment is what St. John the Theologian spoke about in his Gospel as the crisis of the Messiah: Jesus frequently bringing his hearers into a climacteric of judgement (the biblical word is *Krisis*). And it is what St.

¹⁰ It is a concept and a taxonomy which St. Athanasius the Great elaborates at the end of his *De Incarnatione*.chs. 51-55.

Gregory the Theologian spoke about explicitly in the beginning of his *Five Theological Orations*¹¹, where he warned his hearers that to engage in theological discourse without first having a purified and Spirit initiated heart is a catastrophic thing, for it can so derange our basic intimations about God (if our notions are in accord with the ways of the world more than with the ways of God), that one can pervert the fundamental message of the Gospel; preach another Gospel than the one we have received, and be in the end unable to tell apart the Gospel from the culture of the world which the Lord himself warned us would rarely be in sympathy with it.¹²

Gregory's advice was not to speak too much; not to engage in fruitless controversy, not to speak beyond the limit of what one has experienced to be true from the scope of one's own spiritual initiation. Both Theologians, John and Gregory, it seems to me, are giving basic and profound advice that discourse on ecclesiology is above all else a matter of spiritual perception that is a sacred and mysterious thing. John describes it as a person's encounter with the Judgement of the Divine Logos in the here and now of a life: the Eighth day entered into the Seventh. Gregory describes it as a matter of where theology becomes akin to poetry: the interpreter needing a profoundly sensitive touch if the results are not to be bathotic. Given this, it is all the more surprising, is it not, that much of ecclesiology in recent discourse has studiously avoided the two basic characteristics of Pneumatology and Eschatology which seem to define and describe it in the foundational sources. But if we neglect the pneumatological and the eschatological, Church quickly becomes a matter of bureaucracy.

Following on from the issue of perception and spiritual acuity derives a next axiom that I wish to draw attention to. It is a controversial one but one that is often heard in the context of ecumenical discussions involving the Orthodox: controversial because it is often taken by the Non-Orthodox present in the room as an arrogant thing to say, or at least an insensitive thing; and that is the claim the Orthodox make that: 'they are the Church of Christ.' Not part of it, not one form of its iteration in history alongside others, but simply it: the *Ekklesia* of the Risen Lord. This is disturbing to many in the ecumenical dialogue because it is, I suspect, being heard in terms of its 'harmonics' rather than in terms of the note that is trying to be intentionally sounded. It is heard, inevitably perhaps, to imply that other Christian bodies are somehow 'not the Church.' Now, I am aware that some Orthodox writers of recent times have, in fact, stated that position quite explicitly. I simply wish to state here that this is a *non-sequitur* from

¹¹ Orations 27-31. See F W Norris. Faith Gives Fullness To Reason. The 5 Theological Orations of St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Brill. Leiden.

¹² Jn. 1.10; 7.7; 8.23; 14.17; 15. 18-19; 16.33; 17.14;16.

the dogmatic statement that the Orthodox are compelled to affirm in regard to their being the Church of Christ on earth. It is a *non sequitur* that derives only from the narrowest reading of premisses related to the prior dogmatic utterance. If you like, a devolution of other principles from the major premiss, but one that can only be extended on the basis of the narrowest of readings of the evidence, and with, if I may I say so, apparently the narrowest of spirits, and the feeblest forms of charity.

Because when Orthodoxy asserts itself to be the *Ekklesia*, it is primarily stating that it recognises the presence of the Risen Lord's grace fully operative within itself. It thus knows itself because it recognises him. This statement that the Church, to be Church, must know itself in the Christ is none other than the declaration that this recognition is the fundamental kerygma of the Gospel: in so far as it is the recognition that Jesus is Risen, that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God and present Lord of the *Ekklesia*, and that in being able to recognise its Lord, and thereby itself, the Church is enabled solely by the Holy Spirit of God to confess the divine Trinity as the active source of its regeneration. This sounds more technical than it need to. It is, however, more mystical than can be clearly expressed. But I hope to have said enough to explain why the Orthodox will never withdraw from the statement that they are co-terminous with the Church of Christ; because to make this statement is simply the confession: *Christos Anesti*: Christ has Risen, and the asseveration that we have known this to be true in the multitudes of mysteries that constitute the life of the Church. What I would add, however, is that it does not follow that to say Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ, means that all other so called 'denominations' of Christians are alienated from the Church of Christ. That is another statement altogether. It is often extrapolated by Orthodox writers who hate the ecumenical movement and wish to denounce it as a pan-heresy, and who refuse to recognise the charisms of the Spirit anywhere else in Christendom (a ridiculous and fantastic position it would seem to me). This extrapolation seems to me to have made a wrong turn in exegesis: for to sense what the Church is, is quite a different matter from defining what the Church is not. If people hearing this aspect of Orthodox ecclesiology have often wondered what could be the point of dialoguing with a group that can make such a statement, a way forward might be to summarize the nuances in this way: that the truth is that Orthodoxy is far better at knowing itself, than it is in knowing what the other religious communions are. It waits for them to clarify more fully, what they themselves see to be the essential charism of the Church, and how they each represent that

within history and in their own traditions.¹³ This is something that Orthodoxy believes has not yet happened in the Ecumenical movement; and which major statements such as those on Baptism and Eucharist have pointed up as critically necessary, but have not provided answers for: since Baptism and Eucharist are essentially initiatory mysteries into *Ekklesia*, but cannot stand in for a definition of it.

2.2 The Church in the Credal Definition

Let me add a second major statement about Orthodox ecclesiology which many in this room may feel is more approachable. In addition to the scriptures Orthodoxy believes that dogmatic phrase of the Nicene creed is also very important, where the Church is defined as: 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic.' This seems to me to state the same fundamental truth as noted above: that the Church in other words must be able to describe itself, from its own inner consciousness, as being the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ vibrantly alive on earth in the proven awareness (from the acts of its saints, the quality of its worship, and the charisms stirred up in it by the Holy Spirit of God) that it continues the works of Christ on earth, manifests the energy of the Spirit, and lives in the continuing Resurrectional presence of its Lord. These four defining characteristics of the Creed have often been called in western theology the four 'marks' of the Church, but Orthodoxy using biblical terms prefers the description of them as the *phronema Christou*,¹⁴ that 'mindset of Christ' which the Church owns as its proper internal spiritual consciousness by the gift of the Spirit, and into which it is constantly transfigured, both collectively, and in the personal lives of holiness of each of its members. This Lord remains the sole Head and Supreme High Priest of the church of Christ¹⁵, and directs its continuing pilgrimage through time and space. The

¹³ Fr. Stylianopoulos put it well when he wrote: "The Orthodox Church is the true church of God on earth and maintains the fulness of Christ's truth in continuity with the church of the apostles. This awesome claim does not necessarily mean that Orthodox Christians have achieved perfection: for we have many personal shortcomings. Nor does it necessarily mean that the other Christian churches do not serve God's purposes positively: for it is not up to us to judge others, but to live and proclaim the fulness of the truth. But it does mean that if a person carefully examines the history of Christianity, he or she will soon discover that the Orthodox Church alone is in complete sacramental, doctrinal, and canonical continuity with the ancient undivided church as it authoritatively expressed itself through the great Ecumenical Councils.' From: *Christ in Our Midst*. Dept. of Relig. Educn. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Brookline. Mass.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 2.16; Phil. 2.5.

¹⁵ Any other claim that hierarch or prince could ever be the 'Head' of Christ's church, being resisted by Orthodoxy as alien to the Evangelical Tradition, and as suggesting that Christ has abdicated his everlasting royal power, a position contradicted

Church in this sense, therefore, is the continuing progress in time and space, of the Elect saints into their destiny as transfigured 'New Creatures' in the call into ascent to communion with the Living God. The Church is, therefore, not simply a matter of society of believers, but a fundamental question of the metamorphosis from ontological limitation to the radiance of glory, what the Orthodox call the *theiopoiesis kata charin*, and what the western church prefers to call redemption by grace.

2.3 The Church as Icon of the Incarnation

A third central aspect of Orthodox ecclesiology is the manner in which it frequently refers to itself in iconic terms derived from the mystery of the Incarnation. Orthodoxy will not assert that the heavenly church is separated out from the earthly church because the two aspects of its identity are indissolubly bonded as one, in way analogous to the hypostatic union of the Lord's deity and humanity in his one person. The Church, as the apostle clearly taught, is the mystical body of Christ.¹⁶ Similarly, the visible and invisible characters of the church are bound together in an indissoluble union ('a consilience into unity' as St. Cyril of Alexandria put it) that cannot be set apart. Such ecclesiologies of division have about them the same dichotomous character as the christological heresy of Nestorianism. Orthodoxy thus sees the church as the living Icon of Christ. The heavenly and earthly mysteries are organically linked together in one and the same communion, living in one and the same energy of God's salvific grace, albeit in different 'stages' and 'orders' of discipleship.¹⁷ This iconic character of manifesting Christ (among itself

specifically by the credal phrase: 'Whose Kingdom shall have no end', and by numerous biblical teachings such as Mt. 16.8; Mt. 28.20; Eph. 1.22-23. Orthodoxy also rejects the suggestion that any single bishop can represent Christ in a 'vicariate' sense (endowed with the Lord's plenipotentiary powers over his church) as if there was some sort of absentee landlordism involved. Christ has not abdicated his authority, in the Orthodox conception, and that authority is shared among many different offices and vocations among the body of the faithful, according to the various gifts and responsibilities of each Christian, and for the overall service of a ministry of love. There is, accordingly, a major problem, for the Orthodox, with the concept of the papal office as currently understood as a juridical supremacy in the western catholic church.

¹⁶ Rom. 12. 4-5; 1 Cor. 12. 12-27; Eph. 1.23; Eph. 2.16; Eph. 4.4, 12,16; Eph. 5.23, 30; Col. 1.18,24; Col. 3.15.

¹⁷ In the 17th century, in answer to formal approaches by Calvinist theologians who had submitted their teaching on the 'one invisible church' to the Eastern hierarchs, the *Dogmatic Epistle of the Eastern Patriarchs* made the following statement of ecclesiology: 'We believe, as we have been instructed to believe, in what is called (and what in actual fact is) the holy, catholic, apostolic church, which embraces all those, whoever and wherever they might be, who believe in Christ, who being now on their

and to its own communion, and also to the world in the form of its evangelical mission) is seen at its highest pitch in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, which is the apex of the *Koinonia* of the Church. The one bishop, with the local churches gathered round him in the celebration of the holy mystery of communion, has always been seen by the Orthodox as a great icon of the unity of the church.¹⁸ This Eucharistic ecclesiology, so well outlined in recent years by Metropolitan John Zizioulas, is an extension of the Christological principle of Orthodox ecclesiology.

The presentation of the mystery, of Christ, through his Eucharist, is thus no small part of the Church's essential role in society. The mystery of the whole church as icon of Christ is also indefectible, in a way analogous to the Holy Eucharist. Its iconic role is also related to its ontological status: its 'being' as the body of Christ, knitted together in oneness with the living Lord by the power of the Spirit which makes new life. So it is with the church as the Icon of Christ. It involves a moral character of the disciples' collective obedience and fidelity to the Lord, but also an ontological character (in which the indefectibility of its holiness lies) in so far as it is the mystical body of the Risen Lord in the world, and bears all the beauty of his own glory, unfailingly delightful to the eyes of the Father, in the perennial springs of the Spirit's grace.

earthly pilgrimage have not yet come to dwell in the heavenly homeland. But we do not in the least confuse the church in pilgrimage, with the church that has reached the homeland just because (as certain of the heretics think) one and the other both exist, that they both comprise (as it were) two flocks of the single Chief Shepherd who is God, and are sanctified by the one Holy Spirit. Such a confusion of them is out of place and impossible, inasmuch as one is battling, and is still on the way, while the other is already celebrating its victory, and has reached the Fatherland, and has received the reward, something which will also follow for the whole ecumenical church.' Cited in: Pomazansky 1997. pp. 230-231.

¹⁸ This is the context of the very first time the word 'Eucharist' ever appeared in reference to the mystery of the Lord's body and blood, as when Ignatius of Antioch said to the Philadelphian faithful: 'Take great care to preserve one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to unite us by his blood, one sanctuary, just as there is one bishop together with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants. In this way all your acts will be done in accordance with God's will.' Ignatius of Antioch. *To the Philadelphians*: 4: See also, Idem. *To the Smyrnaeans*. 8: 'Shun divisions as the beginning of all evils. All of you follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the Apostles. Respect the deacons as the ordinance of God. Let no one do anything that pertains to the church apart from the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is under the bishop, or one whom he has delegated. Wherever the bishop shall appear, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ may be, there is the catholic church. It is not permitted to baptise or hold a love-feast independently of the bishop, but whatever he approves, that is also well-pleasing to God. In this way all your acts will be sure and valid.' And see: Idem. *To the Ephesians* 5-6; & *To the Magnesians* 6-7.

2.4 The Church in the Typology of the Holy Trinity

Orthodox thought has also extensively applied the typology of the Holy Trinity in its ecclesiology. The Church in this fourth and final type is, therefore, to be understood as the icon of the Holy Trinity on earth. This is a far more difficult image to visualize: just as the icon of the Trinity in the history of iconography has proved to be a supreme challenge to the theological vision of the iconographers. Most here will know St Andrei Rublev's magnificent evocation of the iconic theme of the 'Hospitality of Abraham'¹⁹. Here the icon tries to depict the supremely peaceful energy of union in love, as it issues in the salvific action of God, out of philanthropy for the world. So it is with the church as the Icon of the Trinity. Simply put, the concept of individuation (the three *hypostases* of Father, Son, and Spirit) demonstrate a mystery of such profound union (by which I mean nothing less than Oneness) such that there can only be One God. The power of love dispels dis-union. The supreme individuation (hypostatization) of the three Persons is manifested not in separateness but in the ontological communion of singularity. Similarly, in the local church is manifested the totality of the being of the church, but this individuation is not set against, rather consummated in, the union with the universal church. Its hypostatic identity, as local church, is not as a 'part' of the wider whole (just as the three *hypostases* are not cumulative 'parts' of the single Godhead). Such a trinitarian mystery of the church was revealed in Jesus' own description of the inner energy of ecclesial unity as a mystery that flowed from the very love and unity which He and his Father shared, which is no less than the power of the divine life of the Trinity. These are the words:

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²⁰

This divine union, which among the persons of the Holy Trinity is the coequal power of the divine essence, is, in the case of the church, not so much an 'essence' of sacred union, but a participation in it, as of creatures sharing in the divine life through grace. The Greek word for essence is *Ousia*; that for participation, *Metousia*. It is near enough a synonym for 'communion in grace', or the *theiopoiesis* of the believer that the Christ-life conveys. It is the church's possession of such a *Metousia* in the Holy Trinity

¹⁹ Abraham and Sarah at the Oak of Mamre who serve the three angels: the 'lords' who are referred to as 'one Lord'. Patristic exegesis from ancient times accepted this as a biblical type or textual-icon of the Trinity. Gen. 18. 1-15.

²⁰ Jn. 17. 20-21.

itself that is the heart of its irrefragable union on earth. It is also the root of its ministry and witness as an icon of the Trinity among all mankind.

On the same trinitarian principle (of the perfect co-equality of all the divine *hypostases* in communion) the church's power of government and self-discipline is not 'subordinated to' any other; but seeks to be the servant of the other, and so in mutual *kenosis*, the local churches find commonality of heart and action in the concerted standards of their collective *phronema*, especially as these are manifested in the canons they all willingly observe and maintain. This is an evocation of how the supreme glory of the Father is manifested not in superior power but in the absolute co-equality of all the Persons²¹. Yet, the equality of the Son and Spirit is manifested in their loving service of the Father's will, and their mutual forms of humble *Kenosis* in the extension of God's salvation to the world. This icon of power is highly paradoxical; contrary to the world's expectation and experience, for within the world power seeks to be superior and to subordinate, and individuation seeks to be separate and to disconnect. In the church, however, identity is found in the harmony of communion. Great stress is laid, within Orthodoxy, on the concept of freedom within communion, and it is one of the reasons that models of church authority based upon monarchical centrality have always been rejected, as not in conformity with the being of the church as an iconic witness of freedom. Power learns from Christ to be transfigured as service, and individuation blossoms out as the true flower of loving communion, when it can then have the authority to be truly free. The icon of the Trinity also strongly emphasises the pneumatological character of the *Ekklesia*. As St. Cyril of Alexandria put it: 'the Spirit of God is itself the unity of the church.'²² Thus, as long as the church has the Spirit as its soul and the

²¹ Fr. Dragas 2004. p. 20, expresses it eloquently as follows: 'Being in God the church reflects on earth God's unity in trinity. What is natural to God is given to the church by grace. The grace of the Trinity is the starting point for understanding the nature of the church, and especially her unity in multiplicity, as the trinity shares one life and one being.'

²² 'Christ is the bond of unity, since he is God and man in one and the same person. In speaking of this unity of the Spirit I shall follow the beaten track of the church's doctrine and repeat that we all receive one and the same Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and thereby are mingled with one another, and with God. Though we are many, and Christ makes the Spirit of the Father (which is his own Spirit too) to dwell in each one of us individually, nevertheless the Spirit is One and is Individual. By his own being, therefore, he joins into unity those spirits which by the terms of their own nature as individual persons are cut off from unity with one another. Through his activity they are manifested as a kind of single entity in himself. For just as the power of the holy flesh [the Eucharist] incorporates its participants with one another; just so, in my view, the one indivisible Spirit, who dwells in all of them, brings them into a spiritual unity.' Cyril of Alexandria. *Commentary on John*. 17.21.

principle of its life, so it is a communion which (from the core of its being) cannot tolerate dis-union, cannot comprehend it, or live with it.

3 The Ecumenical Imperative

Well, now I have set out as best I can, within a short space of time, the foundations of Orthodox ecclesial understanding. We have come to that part of the talk which says we have now only to discuss what ecumenism means, what is the oecumenical imperative in the light of this. We have turned a bend in the river, as it were, and the landing stage is in sight. But it is by no means an easy passage to the pier; because, to speak frankly, the Ecumenical movement that set out in the post-war years with so much hope and good will, has tilted over on the sandbanks in our own generation, in the estimate of many sober judges. In the opinion of some very zealous Orthodox spokesmen it has devolved into a new form of Pan-Heresy, a term I think is new coinage, but which is meant to suggest it is on the same level as Gnosticism or Arianism. I don't as yet have a technical response to that, so all I can offer is the honest observation: "Crikey! Who came up with that one?" The Oecumenical Patriarchate (a word incidentally that uses the term in the old sense of having a 'world-wide' remit) has very recently issued a statement in relation to those who try to claim that this position represents authentic Orthodoxy, and it is severely critical of them, accusing them of having a less than sure grasp either on Orthodox theological principles or the demands of Christian charity. That paper can be retrieved readily from the website of the Phanar. It is not surprising that the Patriarchate of Constantinople was among the first to issue such a clarification, on the grounds that Orthodoxy ought not to be represented by the most restrictive of its several theological schools, because the Phanar was itself one of the chief initiators of the modern Ecumenical movement, as early as the time of Patriarch Joachim III in 1902²³.

As the 20th century progressed, the Ecumenical Movement became one of the most distinguished renovations of international Christianity, manifesting a bold and deeply held wish to communicate across deep set historical divisions. The achievements of this movement should not be underestimated. Several instances of ecclesial union occurred among the Protestant churches; and across the larger divisions of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, a genuine desire for community and increased communal awareness became widely prevalent. The Orthodox were among the early and active members the Faith and Order movement (after

²³ See, for example, the *Encyclical* of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Joachim III, 1902.

1948 of the WCC) and included among them such skilled and faithful representatives as Archpriest Georges Florovsky, Metropolitan Germanos of Thyateira and the Georgian theologian Grigol Peradze, who has recently been canonized as a saint ²⁴.

But the movement has also been seen to have languished from its first beginnings when heady feelings of the excitement of mutual discovery, were so evident among the movement's leaders, and so too the rediscovery of mutual respect in the wider membership, and the desire to lay aside the narrow channels of apologetic denunciations. As the movement became more successful in extending its insights institutionally and concretising them in international ecclesial structures, so too new problems arose. Deepening mutual knowledge of course, was not always the panacea it might have been originally thought. A clearer sense of our neighbour might serve to deepen dissatisfaction with them, as much as it might serve to dissipate prejudice. To this one might add, in most general terms, that familiarity can often breed contempt. Much of the agenda of the latter part of the 20th century turned inward in the WCC, attempting to keep the vehicle on the road in the form of a set of observations about Christianity that could be erected as the fundamental common denominator of what Christians were about. Accordingly much stress was laid on the issue of the common recognition of Baptism, and the common core of Eucharist consensus; but not with much of a corresponding sense that the Eucharists in question were understood very differently from one another, or that Baptism from different experiences of ecclesial *Koinonia* might also signify different things. The unresolved Eucharistic worship issue eventually came to be critical in the very heart of the ecumenical experience of navigating common prayer: and the progressive elaboration of worship experiences that were designed not to raise serious conflicts, sometimes led directly to the critical raising of those very problems they tried to avoid. After the Canberra meeting prayer ritual involving shamans, several Orthodox churches formally withdrew from the WCC denouncing it as a para-ecclesiastical organisation, which they accused of having lost its rootedness in fundamentals of Christian tradition. Current issues in the management of the WCC today involve the Orthodox in trying to widen the base of ecumenical thinking to include not simply Baptism, Eucharist and Bible, as *fundamenta* but also Patristics, Liturgy, Iconography and

²⁴ After the Seventies there were also active such Orthodox theologians as Fr. John Meyendorff, Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov), and Metropolitan George Khodr.

Hagiography as sources of authority and manifestations of fundamental Christian Tradition.

This is a very potted history of the ecumenical movement that many of you will know much more intimately and in greater detail. I present this poorly pixelated sketch merely to draw our collective attention to the issue that many have sensed in our time: that not only the WCC is at some form of turning point; but more generally the Ecumenical Movement itself is at a crossroads. Now why this should be is puzzling; for one of the great achievements of the Movement so far, so it seems to me, is the desire to read histories and texts in a non-apologetic way as a standard.

For example: We are now in a position that is unthinkable from the perspective of anyone at the dawn of the 20th century: I mean, consider this – to read the Bible from the standpoint of a Roman Catholic scholar, or a Protestant scholar. Does it make sense any more to set this term of reference? In 1940 there was a world of difference between a Garrigou Lagrange and a Vincent Taylor. Today there has been a revolution in the deep-reading of the Holy Scripture that has cut across former denominational divisions: leaving the old classifications redundant, while nevertheless sustaining a more than clear distinction between what I can crudely refer to as evidently ‘faithful readings’ of Holy Scripture, and apparently ‘non-faithful’ ones. This would seem to suggest that we could have much greater fruits ahead for the ecumenical movement if it still had the *afflatus* to persevere.

This is what I would call the ‘ecumenical imperative’: not the desire to urge conformity on the face of the churches, a conformity that can only work at the most superficial levels, and on basic common denominators that are hardly real as such: but instead of this to foster the desire to respect one another: continue to learn from one another; continue to be ready to hear one another without the apologetic desire to correct and ‘reform’. It can only be sustained if this present generation can find again the vocational excitement that drove the pioneers of the movement and carried along so many others by the force of their fire of *caritas*. But it might need new iterations that are very challenging. It might, for example, need the abandonment of the sense that there is any longer a corporate Protestantism (a supposition that it was still possible to make in the early decades of the 20th century) that can be laid down as a default language in the international Oecumene, since the Protestant theologians (not to put too fine a point on it) were simply world-leaders in those days in terms of their access to scholarly theological standards; and the sophistication of their argumentation was not equally matched.

Catholics, and Orthodox especially, are in a vastly improved position these days. But if Protestantism needs to face the new challenge of finding a

workable definition of what it is, what it represents; in other words a more precisely articulated Ecclesiology, which it seems to have progressively and profoundly de-sacramentalised in recent times, then so too, Catholicism and Orthodoxy need to revise their ecumenical agendas: for both have certainly seemed to take the 'imperative' part out of ecumenicity. It may be time for both churches to send delegations to WCC events which are less like official embassies, and instead of using the WCC as a stage for international ecclesial polity (which is part of the issue of supra-national ecclesiality which they have both said they do not care for) instead focus on a task that really lies ahead of us all with some urgency: to identify from the mountain of texts and prayers and exegeses that the churches have issued out of their historical encounter with Christ, those core texts which a given local Christian community really feels identifies themselves, and defines their essential kerygma. Such a task would serve to identify the other by identifying the self. This task is a profound eschatological realization of the Church and would renew local communities, work at the level of local communities, where the pneumatological reality of *Ekklesia* is, I suggest going to be found, if it is an issue of mutual *energeia*: rather than just exercises in historical theology.

Let me end by turning the accusing finger back home. I began by sketching out what I think to be beautiful and admirable characteristics of Orthodox ecclesiology. I commend them widely to all Christians: whether in Orthodox communion or not. I hope they may gain a wider hearing. Orthodoxy may indeed have some martyrial witness to offer the sophisticated West. But if the ecclesiology is beautiful and biblically profound, as I think it is, why is it that Orthodox are so poor at being able to exercise Ecumenical discernment? Why is it still an issue with us whether to recognize the baptisms of others? Why an issue to agonize over Catholic or Anglican orders? Or decide whether we can accept a Coptic Christology so clearly rooted in the thought of St. Cyril of Alexandria whom we ourselves elevate as one of the greatest Christologists? Why is it still such a big deal among the Orthodox whether or not they can canonically stand in the same room as a non-Orthodox person of any type, and say prayers with them. It is not a matter of not having enough data. We have before us the 'authoritative' texts of St. Cyprian for example, which take a hard line on who is in or out of the church, and rigorists among us lean heavily on them ²⁵. But we also have numerous examples of the eirenic spirit of the canonical epistles of many more fathers, not least Basil's

²⁵ *De Unitate Ecclesiae Catholicae*. for example or *Epistle 66*. But few notice that Cyprian himself changed his mind about the severity of his views on Church-belonging when the Second Persecution struck.

Canonical Epistles ²⁶, which take a much more catholic approach to the issue of the borders of the Church; and the regular example of the remarkable openness of major Church Fathers (such as St. Gregory the Theologian) who were willing even to accept the baptism of Arian Unitarians if they could thereby induced to join his communion: a canonical matter where few modern Orthodox would ever follow him. We Orthodox have distinctions of *haireisis* (heresy) *schisma* (schism) and *diairesis* (illicit conventicles) which were fashioned in church conflicts more than a millennium and a half ago. They do not serve to describe the reality any longer. They are not precise enough. They cannot diagnose well, nor can they offer remedy well enough, for a Church that is now painfully divided: and we might say often unnecessarily divided (though sometimes rightly separated - if we could but be wise enough to know when and on what scores that might be so).

To start the ecumenical imperative again, would involve some of the same ground being traversed: being willing to listen to one another, for example, without being offended; without solely wanting to score points. It would demand courage in other words. But those of us who profess that the Spirit is the soul of the Church, are held also to the fact that the Spirit is the bond of communion, and if it is divine communion, it is itself a mystical imperative that the Church must embody within a world that has gone global but lost its sense of familial union. And those of us who profess that Christ's *Ekklesia*, simply by virtue of it being his Mystical Body, is a Christological 'consilience into union' (and unique on the face of the earth for that very fact), are committed to nothing less than believing the ecumenical imperative is exactly that: a fundamentally necessary quest. We are given the task either of persuading ourselves that the Church is His instrument for the salvation of the modern world by virtue of it being singly, sacredly, catholically, and apostolically; or convicting ourselves, perhaps, that our creeds may not be exactly what we really live out of.

²⁶ The 92 *Canons of St. Basil*. esp. Canon. 1. from his Epistle 188.