Orthros and the Synodal Divine Liturgy at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Crete (www.flic.kr/s/aHsk-D78ESx).

OUT OF CRETE

Discerning the Mystery of the Church: Reflections on a Document of the Council of Crete

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In the aftermath of the recent council held in Crete, the waters of the Orthodox world are still troubled by several disputes concerning both administrative and theological issues. Here I would like to tackle one of the theological matters: the distinction between the Orthodox Church and non-Orthodox Churches made in the document "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World." The topic ignited some discussions before the council, when the draft did not include this distinction but simply applied the term *church* to Christian communities other than the Orthodox Church. For this reason, among others, the Patriarchate of Georgia refused to attend the synod, while voices such as those of the Greek bishops Hierotheos Vlachos and Athanasios of Limassol, two synodal fathers who did not sign the document, continue to oppose the new formula.[1] Against the background of this troubled setting, I will argue here that the distinction between "Orthodox" and "non-Orthodox" churches proposed in Crete is actually one of the most elegant ecclesiological expressions to date, and might be a starting point for future Orthodox ecclesiological elaboration.

Church: One Common and Many Technical Meanings

If we try to define the term *church*, it is hard to discover a unique and generally-applicable formula. Fr. Georges Florovsky made the now-

[1] For Hierotheos Vlachos, see his interview posted on Pravmir.com on July 2, 2016. www.pravmir.com/why-i-did-not-sign-the-text-relations-of-the-orthodox-church-with-the-rest-of-the-christian-world/. For Athanasios of Limassol, see the statement posted on Pravmir.com on July 5, 2016. www.pravoslavie.ru/english/95018.htm.

classic observation that the term *ekklēsia* (church) was never defined by the Church fathers or other theologians:

It is impossible to start with a formal definition of the Church. For, strictly speaking, there is none which could claim any doctrinal authority. None can be found in the Fathers. No definition has been given by the Ecumenical Councils. In the doctrinal summaries, drafted on various occasions in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century and taken often (but wrongly) for the "symbolic books," again no definition of the Church was given, except a reference to the relevant clause of the Creed, followed by some comments. This lack of formal definitions does not mean, however, a confusion of ideas or any obscurity of view. The Fathers did not care so much for the *doctrine* of the Church precisely because the glorious *reality* of the Church was open to their spiritual vision. One does not define what is self-evident.[2]

Nevertheless, I will continue this discussion following a different avenue of argumentation, and begin with the observation that the notion of *church* is ambivalent: it may denote either the community (the assembly of Christians) or the institution of the Church defined in the terms of technical theological idiom.

The first meaning is the most common, being widely used, non-technical, and originating in the common ancient Greek meaning of *ekklēsia*, which may be rendered in English simply as "community," "congregation," or "assembly," and need not designate one that is religious. We must note that this general and ordinary meaning is largely the one intended in the Bible and the writings of the Church fathers, as well as in our day, and in many contexts of everyday life, with the slightly more qualified meaning of a *Christian* community or assembly. Every Christian person, Orthodox or Pentecostal, Catholic or Methodist, Lutheran or Anglican, knows that on Sunday morning, Christians go to church.

Two other distinctive features are implied in this common meaning. First, it does not entail a dogmatic dimension, beyond its later reference to a Christian community. Second, the term *church*, understood in this sense, can be negatively qualified. In the New Testament, for instance, God reprehends seven churches of Asia Minor for some of their members' behaviors and ideas. Certain people from the church in Pergamum "hold to the teaching of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14), while the church in Sardis as a whole is "dead" (Rev 3:1) and is enjoined to repent. Likewise, the church of Laodicea is addressed the following sharp words: "So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16). St. Basil of Caesarea, who lived in a period of tragic ecclesial division similar to that of our times, complained that Arians introduced wrong theological expressions, "and for this reason, the churches, having become rotten, like vessels made porous, received the heretical corruption that was streaming in."[3] Thus, while in patristic texts the term *ekklēsia* was indeed mostly used to denote the one Church, an orthodox community, one may also find the term associated several times with non-orthodox groups: historians such as Socrates and Sozomen employ the expressions "Arian church" and "Novatian church," while in St. John Chrysostom, one may find the phrase "the church of the nations" (*tēs ek tōn ethnōn ekklēsias*).[4]

By contrast, the second meaning is more narrow, technical, and dogmatic,

[2] Georges Florovsky, "The Church: Her Nature and Task," in *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, vol. 1: *Universal Church in God's Design* (London: SCM Press, 1948), 43.

[3] St. Basil, Epistle 242.

[4] St. John Chrysostom, Instructions to Catechumens, 1.4.

with a history emerging already in the New Testament with the first apostolic attempts to identify the specific marks and attributes of the new Christian community. The dogmatic dimension can be fully encountered in this second meaning, which denotes the Church as Christ's one and holy bride, and has never received a negative attribute in the Bible or the Church Fathers. Thus, the Church is portrayed as the "community of God," or as a living organism, a unique "body" guided by its head, Jesus Christ.[5] Developing a related point, St. Ignatius of Antioch proclaims in the second century that "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal church."[6] In his *Letter to the Trallians*, the Church is already envisioned as a congregation organized according to a hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons. Here, we should note that what constitutes the Church in an authentic way actually includes a certain tacit definition: the Church is the community in which Jesus Christ is present. Likewise, St. Irenaeus of Lyons avows that, "wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and all the grace." [7] Once again, this description encapsulates the idea that the Church cannot consist of any other human community than the one in which the Spirit of God is manifest. In contemporary terms, St. Ignatius's definition is christological and St. Irenaeus's is pneumatological.

It has been observed that a concerted effort to articulate the defining elements of the Church emerged much later, in the fifteen century, when the Reformation ignited a real debate over the identifying characteristics of the *ekklēsia* and its nature: should this include the sacraments? If so, which ones, and performed under what conditions? These discussions triggered the beginning of a more systematic reflection on the nature of the Church, and the emergence of a new theological discipline, ecclesiology. Later on, in the twentieth century, ecumenical dialogues gave new stimulus and stirred up more methodical inquires into this topic, and led ecclesiology to reach its age of maturity, and—hopefully!—of wisdom.

In the history of Orthodox theology, we may encounter several distinct ecclesiological models and visions of the nature of the Church, as Fr. Cyril Hovorun has demonstrated: organic (St. Paul), christological (St. Ignatius), pneumatological (St. Irenaeus), incarnational (St. Athanatius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and St. Cyril of Alexandria), symphonic (medieval Byzantium), Sophiological (Solovyov and Bulgakov), "new reality" (Florovsky), eucharistic (Afanasiev), personalist (Zizioulas), and trinitarian (Stăniloae and Lossky).[8] All of these factors lead us to a conclusion which slightly modifies Fr. Florovsky's position: we are not able to reach a definition of the Church, not because there is none, but because there are too many.[9]

Apophatic Ecclesiology

Moving one step beyond this observation, I would argue that a final and comprehensive definition of *church* will always be impossible, because the term will remain part of the ongoing evolution of theological reflection on the *ekklēsia* understood as a constant human collective dialogue with God. Thus, it will perpetually remain an open concept. Theology itself, as an area of human reflection, continuously enacts a relationship between God and humans. Ecclesiology is a theological endeavor to discern the mystery of God's actions in his people. It will always provide a human—though hopefully inspired—perspective on this mystery. Any view on the Church con-

[5] For the expression "community of God" (*ekklēsia toū Theoū*) see 1 Cor. 10:32; 11:16; 15:9; 1 Thess. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4; for the Church as Christ's body, see Eph. 4:11–16; 5:23.

[6] Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.2.

[7] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3.24.1.

[8] Cyril Hovorun, *Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles on Church Awareness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[9] This situation is not limited to the Orthodox world, but each Christian confession includes different theological opinions. Inter-confessional dissimilarities are sometimes very profound. See, for instance, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

stantly reflects the way in which we, as human beings, understand the relationship between God and us. Since the *ekklēsia* is a living and ongoing human existential relationship with God, the meaning of this term will always be open to a constant enrichment and deeper examination.

In this way, the impossibility of reaching a final definition of the term *church* entails a surprisingly positive consequence: it shifts our attention from the linguistic dimension to the mystical one of discerning the meaning of *ekklēsia* by living and advancing into its mystery. Thus, we discover its apophatic dimension while realizing that a final definition will ever be an unattainable target, since we are fundamentally unable to grasp the essence of the Church. But we will always be able to advance in our understanding of its mystery in which language and contemplation intertwine and constantly send our minds to this ungraspable work of God in his people. As theologians such as Fr. André Scrima have argued, the human being, in a manner similar to God, implies an enthralling apophatic dimension.[10] Since the Church is an assembly of humans, she will always include an unknown and ineffable dimension. Fr. Scrima's line of reasoning suggests that one may elaborate an apophatic ecclesiology. I would even advance that the nature of the Church, like the nature of God and the nature of the human being, is fundamentally apophatic.[11] By using this term I do not mean that the church should be defined exclusively through negative attributes, but that its essence is unfathomable, and its life, which is our relationship with God, will never be adequately expressed through human language.

Consequently, it will be always impossible to reach a comprehensive and ultimate definition of the concept of the Church. Any effort in ecclesiology would attempt to define the *ekklēsia* from a certain limited perspective. Beyond all our attempts to grasp the meaning of the church in some linguistic formula, an ineffable and apophatic facet will always characterize her, since she is our infinite relationship with God. As in the case of defining God, one phrase or another may describe a particular facet of this relationship, and therefore the Church, in positive terms; at the same time, however, an unknown, concealed, and actually infinite dimension will perpetually remain within the mystery of its existence.

The Distinction Proposed by the Synod of Crete

From this theoretical background we may once again approach the term *church* as employed at the Council of Crete. In the reaction of its critics, we can discern an authentic concern for a key technical understanding of the Church: namely, the *ekklēsia* seen as the repository of revealed truth, as the channel of grace and of the Holy Spirit inherited through apostolic succession, and of the Spirit operating in the sacraments. We have to agree, on the one hand, that all these elements are fundamental constituent dimensions of the *ekklēsia*, and they should be included in any good definition of the notion of the Church. On the other hand, the critics' understanding of the Church is restricted exclusively to this technical meaning. We may call it the "narrow sense only" position. This sense is neither comprehensive nor final, nor the best definition of the Church, but one articulated only from a liturgical-dogmatic perspective. This position cannot account for the negative connotations sometimes associated with the word *ekklēsia* in the

[10] André Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, trans. Octavian Gabor (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2016).

[11] St. John Chrysostom states that the Church, similar to God, is described by many names, none of them presenting the whole truth but each a small part. See *Two Homilies to Eutropius*, 2.6.

New Testament and in the writing of St. Basil.

To the restricted view of the "narrow sense only" position, I would oppose the ecclesiological vision proposed by the Council of Crete and its terminological solution, which I appreciate as more congruent with the history of this term in the Orthodox tradition. Instead of distinguishing between Church and not-Church, the document of Crete posits a distinction between "the Orthodox Church" and "non-Orthodox Churches." The key consequence is that it confers more flexibility on the concept of *ekklēsia*, which now is able to cover at the same time both the narrow, technical meaning, and also the common meaning used in the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and our everyday language.

Another key aspect of the conciliar definition is that the ancient term *orthodox* shines with new light in this context, encompassing all of the dogmatic qualifications of the notion of the Church, and in so doing answering the critics' concerns. Once again, I submit that their real concerns about the definition of the term *church* are not about a word but a more profound theological idea, namely, the unique preservation of the truth and the unique validity of the sacraments of the Orthodox Church—in a word, its ortho-doxy. I suggest that, in accordance with the distinction used by the Council of Crete, the term *orthodox* is associated to the word *church*, when it conveys the narrow, technical, and dogmatic aspect which identifies the Orthodox Church as the preeminent channel of grace and truth, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic *ekklēsia* in direct continuity with the Church which Christ initiated, fostered, and guided throughout the centuries to the present days through the Holy Spirit.

As with all human formulations, the new definition may not be perfect or final, but it implies three aspects which mark a positive step forward from the "narrow sense only" position. First, the distinction offers a more elegant and efficient solution to the use of the word *church*, since it covers, simultaneously and without contradiction, the two vital facets of the notion, the common and the more technical. Second, while the common meaning is more faithful to biblical, patristic, and present everyday use in which the term *church* is simply understood as Christian community, the second sense covers the narrow, technical, and dogmatically necessary facets. Third, it is more open to other Christians who confess their faith in Christ and the Trinity. For these reasons, the Council of Crete's use of the word *church* is a stimulating and appropriate starting point for any future articulation of an Orthodox ecclesiological vision. ✠

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