

Manifestations of “Orthodox” Ecclesiology

I. Introduction

If there is a positive side to the protracted crisis rattling the Orthodox Church in America it is the opportunity afforded us to re-examine the current life and work of our local Church. The task is enormous and not without inherent difficulties. Beneath virtually every facet of our crisis, there emerge questions related to ecclesiology. Until it became apparent that the infrastructure of the OCA was in desperate need of reform, a serious assessment of our ecclesiology and the way it manifests itself in America was either ignored or hidden beneath a false sense of security in the knowledge that the Church was being faithful to the Gospel of the Lord. This is not to say that fundamental issues relative to Orthodox ecclesiology and, by extension, the missionary vision and work of the Church in America were not discussed, debated and even implemented. The articles by Father Alexander Schmemmann on the spiritual, canonical and liturgical problems of Orthodoxy in America – articles predating autocephaly – are still relevant.^[1] These probing and prophetic articles are joined by the cautionary and historically grounded works of Father John Meyendorff who saw the Church as a living reality that was not immune or resistant to developments that affected the external contours of ecclesial life and administration. These developments often veiled the very nature and purpose of the Church in and for the life of the world.^[2]

Unfortunately, the ecclesiological insights offered by Fathers Schmemmann and Meyendorff as well as others, not the least being Father Georges Florovsky, were absorbed into a movement that created another ecclesial dynamic. On the one hand, this dynamic helped to create the impression that the Church was facing the challenges of American life. On the other hand, emphasis was placed on the restoration of an ecclesiology through which the life and work of the Church would be manifested in the symbiotic relationship of bishop, priest and laity. In my opinion, this seductive dynamic accomplished neither.

II. Ecclesiology and the Eucharist

Ecclesiology or more specifically, ecclesial reform is coming to be seen as an imperative to resolving our crisis. However, before the interrelationship of bishop, priest and laity can be addressed it needs to be stressed that Orthodox ecclesiology has a context that cannot be separated from the Eucharist. It is the **con-celebration** of the Eucharist by clergy and laity and not the formal convening of a council that provides the foundation and context for Orthodox ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is first and foremost a Eucharistic phenomenon – a Eucharistic event – on which rests all discussions regarding conciliarity as well as catholicity in its quantitative and qualitative expressions. Metropolitan Maximus of Sardis strongly affirms that ‘without reference to the Eucharist, the entire ecclesiology of primitive Christianity becomes meaningless.’^[3] We can add that without reference to the Eucharist the ecclesiology of any period of Church history becomes compromised and therefore distorted. It is the Eucharist that forms the most basic image **of** and context **for** conciliarity.

To speak about ecclesiology and conciliarity is to first identify the Christian community as the gathering of the local Church to celebrate the Eucharist.^[4] The letters of Saint Paul are the earliest texts that describe the grounding of our ecclesiology in the Eucharist. Terms or phrases such as synerchesthai or synerchesthai epi to avto or kuriakon deipnon refer to the gathering of Christians to celebrate the Lord’s supper.^[5]

Juxtaposed to the Pauline letters is the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15. The Lucan account of this council has become more in theory than in fact the paradigm for ecclesial conciliarity. Very little is known about its composition. Less is known about its relationship to the

Eucharist. Yet, given the Emmaus event in Luke's Gospel (24:13ff) and the description in Acts of the Jerusalem Church devoting itself "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"(2:42) the importance and centrality of the Eucharist cannot be easily ignored.

Parenthetically, regarding the Jerusalem council, one can question its importance relative to Saint Paul since he was quite confident that the gospel he preached to the Gentiles was the gospel of the risen Lord. That Saint Paul makes no explicit mention of the Jerusalem council in Galatians 2 possesses exegetical challenges in light of Acts 15. Clearly, Paul comes to Jerusalem not seeking approval but moral support for his missionary efforts from the "respected" leaders of the local Church. He fears that he "runs in vain" (2:2) due to the influence exerted by the Judaizers over the Galatians.^[6]

The few details about the Jerusalem council offered by Acts 15 show that the local Church functioned as a conciliar body in discussing and debating issues relative to the preaching of the Gospel. At the same time Acts 15 lends itself to two dimensions of conciliarity. In verse 6 it is the Apostles and elders who gather (synechthesan) apart from the rest of the Church to discuss and debate the Gentile question. Later, in verse 22 mention is made of how the Apostles, elders and the whole Church chose men (andras) to "send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabus" to deliver the decision of the Jerusalem council, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (vs.28). One can ask, does Acts 15 provide two configurations of conciliarity i.e. 1) Apostles and elders and 2) Apostles, elders and the whole Church? If so, does it then set the foundation for what will eventually become exclusively hierarchical councils?

The Eucharistic community is a charismatic and therefore Spirit filled community. In and through the Holy Spirit the body of Christ lives and works. In and through the Holy Spirit a new freedom – a freedom from sin and from the law - reigns in the Christian community. "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit." (Rom 7:6) But, as Saint Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12-14, freedom in the Spirit does not imply that all are endowed with the same or equal gifts necessary for the life of the Church.^[7]

Within the New Testament, local Churches possess a structure rooted in the charismata of the Holy Spirit. Emerging from these pneumatic charisms is a hierarchical structure necessary for the building up of Christ's body. Placed within a Eucharistic context there can be no hierarchy without the local Church nor can there be a local Church without its hierarchy. The variety and inequality of gifts and offices are offset by the interdependence of every member of the Eucharistic community. "If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable..."(1 Corinthians 12:20-22). From a Eucharistic and therefore conciliar perspective there is an interdependency of all the members comprising the body of Christ. "Now you (umeis) are the body of Christ and each one is a member of it."(12:27)

III. The Early Years following the Apostles

After the deaths of the Apostles and by the time the letters of Clement and Ignatius were written at the beginning of the 2nd century, the Churches in and around Rome and Syria enter another stage of development with respect to hierarchy and conciliarity. For both writers, but especially St. Ignatius, the episcopacy was an established and defined office. Whether the presbyter-bishop referred to by Clement predates the monarchical bishop of Ignatius is of secondary importance. What is to be stressed is that each local Church appears to have had a hierarchically conciliar structure that continued to reflect the celebration of the Eucharist. He who presided over the Eucharist was entrusted to oversee the daily life of the local community.

With dissent dividing the Church in Corinth due to the depositions of its leaders, Clement sets out to bolster the office of presbyter-bishop. "Our Apostles also knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the title of bishop. For this cause, therefore, since they had received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have been already mentioned and then made a decree that, when these men fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. We consider therefore that it is not just to remove from their ministry those who were appointed by them, or later on by other eminent men, **with the consent of the whole Church** (tns ekklesias pasns), and ministered to the flock of Christ without blame, humbly, peaceably, and disinterestedly, and for many years have received a universally favorable testimony. For our sin is not small, if we eject from the episcopate those who have blamelessly and in holiness offered its sacrifices. Blessed are those Presbyters who finished their course before now, and have obtained a fruitful and perfect release in the ripeness of completed works..." (1 Clem. 44,1-4) Details are lacking as to why the Corinthian leaders were expelled from office. However, it is clear for Clement that those deposed had been chosen "**with the consent of the whole Church**" and that they presided over the Eucharist. Among Clement's concerns for the Corinthian Church was its disobedience to what was for him a tradition established by the Apostles. Deposition of the Corinthian bishops (presbyter-bishops) was a break with the Apostles, which left the local Church divided and without one to preside at the Eucharist. The bishop for Clement was the one who ensured the unity of the Church and its continuity with the Apostles.

Complementing Clement, Ignatius also sees the bishop as the one entrusted to teach the true faith to his Church. All are to be in "agreement with the mind of the bishop." (Eph.4) The one who teaches is also the one chosen to maintain the unity of the local Church. As teacher and standard of truth, the bishop stands in the center of the Eucharistic community where the **conciliar** unity of the "Catholic Church" (Smyrn.8,2) is manifested. "Be careful therefore to use one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow servants), in order that whatever you do you may do it according to God." (Phil.4)

Both Clement and Ignatius see the hierarchy of the local Church as essential for maintaining Eucharistic unity, conciliarity and catholicity as fullness of faith.^[8] However, it has been suggested that in 1 Clement there is a shift in how ecclesial hierarchy is perceived. It has been suggested that Clement views hierarchy more from a legalistic perspective than as a charism of the Spirit. This shift in emphasis led Rudolf Sohm, the 19th century German jurist and historian to see Clement's understanding of hierarchy as the starting point for canon law.^[9] In part, this observation points to the formalization of Apostolic Tradition in the context of Liturgical worship to the extent that the involvement of the Spirit is minimized. Consequently, the groundwork is prepared for formalism, as an established custom or law, to curtail and even oppose the work of the Spirit. "Each of us, brethren, must in his own place endeavor to please God with a good conscience, reverently taking care not to deviate from his established rules of service (lietourgias avtou kanona)." (41,1) Already, In 1 Clement, one catches a glimpse at how authority as a charism of the Spirit was being posed to conflict with the law. Consequently, as the Church continued to live and grow, Tradition as the expression of the Church's life in the Spirit will be in conflict with any impersonal and therefore tyrannical interpretation and implementation of the canons.^[10]

When the canons became reduced to a legal system complemented by liturgical formalism, the Spirit underwent a process of depersonalization. The legal code bolstered by liturgical formalism often usurped the person of the Spirit through whom every one and every thing receives its authentic personal or hypostatic identity within the life of the Eucharistic community. Once **law and form** became equated with the activity of the Spirit, the way was opened for a new model of ecclesiology to ensue. Within a Eucharistic context, hierarchy, particularly the office of the bishop, would supersede the role of the presbyterate and laity. Conciliarity would eventually become an episcopal phenomenon.

IV. Saint Cyprian of Carthage

By the middle of the 3rd century local ecclesial conciliarity and the question of Roman Primacy were of great concern for Saint Cyprian of Carthage. Cyprian has been used as one of the pillars upholding Eucharistic ecclesiology and therefore Eucharistic conciliarity.^[11] Father Nicholas Afanassieff, canonist and church historian focuses on Cyprian's letter xiv (written 250 A.D.) as one of the proof texts to demonstrate the inclusive composition of a local Church council. "[F]rom the beginning of my episcopate, I decided to do nothing of my own opinion privately without your advice and without the consent of the people."

Two questions arise from this letter. First, what is meant by "consent of the people" and second, did Saint Cyprian's conciliar spirit always prevail in matters of Church life? Although "consent of the people" evokes an image of a council, it is certain that slaves and women of the Church were excluded from participating. Until the latter part of the 20th century, conciliar inclusiveness outside the context of the Eucharist was restricted to men.

As to the question of Cyprian consistently maintaining a conciliar spirit, the answer is NO! For obvious reasons Father Afanassieff did not quote texts that would undermine or threaten Cyprian's image and practice of conciliarity. Saint Cyprian was not reluctant to act unilaterally. In his letter xxxviii also addressed to priests, deacons and all the people, he writes: "In the ordination of clerics, dearly beloved brethren, we are accustomed to consult you in advance and in common council to weigh the characters and merits of each one. But human testimonies must not be looked for when **divine approbation supercedes the council of the Church.**" Ultimately, in this case, it is the bishop, and only the bishop, who decides who has been divinely approved.

Though one passage from a collection of 80 letters and numerous treatises is insufficient to draw firm conclusions regarding episcopal unilateralism, Cyprian's letter xxxviii does provide a precedent for a bishop to act without the consent of his clergy and laity. This precedent later becomes an established norm in Byzantine canon law.^[12]

V. The Byzantine Period

With the conversion of Constantine and the eventual *symphonia* established between Church and State, ecclesiology takes on a configuration that is, for all intents and purposes, exclusively episcopal. The only lay person to play an active role in a council was the emperor or empress. Non-episcopal delegates to councils represented their respective bishops. With empire and Church forging an inextricable bond, conciliarity takes upon itself juridical authority. Decisions of councils, particularly those labeled as Ecumenical, were implemented not only through the Church but through imperial channels which often helped to drive deeper the wedge between the Orthodox and heterodox.

As conciliarity acquired legal status, i.e. imperial support and protection, the focus on the Eucharist diminished.^[13] Beginning with the second half of the 4th century, and lasting for more than a millennium, the conciliarity of the Church rooted in the Eucharist became more of a memory than a reality. Two texts help to draw out the tension of frequent versus infrequent reception of the Eucharist that remains to this day. Canon 2 of Antioch (ca.330) decreed: "All those who enter God's Church and hear the sacred Scriptures but do not take part in prayer together with the people, or turn away from the Eucharistic communion in some disorder, let them be expelled from the Church until they have done penance."^[14] Preaching to his congregation in Constantinople, Chrysostom seems to express his own inner conflict regarding the frequency of communion. "What then? Do we not offer [the Eucharistic sacrifice] every day (ekaste nmerpan ou prosperomen)?.. Many communicate in this sacrifice once in the entire year, others twice, still others frequently... Which ones do we accept with approval? Those who [partake] once, those who [do so] frequently, or those who seldom [do so]? Neither those who once, nor those who

frequently, nor those who seldom [partake], but those [who do so] with a clean conscience, those with pure hearts, those with an irreproachable life. Let such ones approach [to receive communion] continually, but those who are not, not even once! Why so? Because they receive unto their own judgment and condemnation and punishment and retaliation... These things I say not as forbidding you the once annual coming [to communion], but as wishing you to draw near continually.”^[15]

The Church and its doctrine being “in harmony with the Eucharist”^[16] would remain visible but dormant until the Kollyvades movement on Mount Athos in the 18th century.^[17] In Russia the exhortation to return to the Eucharist would be made outside of the monastic cloister by Saint John of Kronstadt in the 19th century.

Ironically, even when less emphasis was placed on the Eucharist and when conciliarity morphed into an episcopal and imperial institution driven by **law** and **form**, the activity of the Spirit still remained alive and strong. The Byzantine period witnessed to the ecumenical councils, the Studite reforms of the 9th century, the Palaeologan renaissance which began in the 13th century and the Palamite councils of the 14th century.

As infrequent communion became the norm, as councils took on the configuration of the imperial senate and became exclusively episcopal in composition, ecclesiology as a catholic i.e. universal or inclusive event uniting clergy and laity became a memory locked in the past.

It was not until the Moscow council of 1917-18 that conciliarity again became a manifestation of the whole Church gathered together as bishops, priests and laity.

VI. The Moscow Council

Much has been said and written about the Moscow council.^[18] There are some in the OCA who see the Moscow council as a point of reference for returning to a more inclusive ecclesiology. The reform and counter reform movements that swept through the Russian Church beginning in the early part of the 19th century led to the formal preparation of the Moscow Council in 1905. “By 1917 the bishops stood ready to abandon the *ancien regime*.”^[19]

The Moscow council was a major step towards ecclesial reform. Until the election of Metropolitan Tikhon as Patriarch of Moscow the Russian Church, since the Reforms of Peter the Great in the 18th century, had functioned as a national Protestant Church. Peter’s Reforms reduced the Orthodox Church to a department of the state. Replacing the Patriarch with the monarch, the Reforms took the Russian Church a step further in molding ecclesiology into a juridical institution. Every aspect of Church life was affected by the intrusion of civil law. The Holy and Governing Synod presided over by the Emperor’s lay Ober-procurator instilled in the collective psyche of the Russian Church the rule of law while the law of the Spirit (Rom.8:2) became an elusive ideal. Indeed, the Ecclesiastical Reforms of Peter exceeded the juridical antecedents of Byzantium. Yet, here too, as with the Church in Byzantium, the Holy Spirit remained active. While the Russian Church was held captive by imperial law and while the Eucharist continued to be a legal obligation, missionary activity continued, holy men and women were glorified and the Optina Startzy were saving souls.

With the opening of the Moscow council on 15 August 1917, the Church Reforms of Peter began to be undone. However, as Father Afanassieff rightly points out, the council was in its very essence flawed. It could not free itself from “the prison of the law.”^[20] The courage, zeal and faith of the participants could not transcend the juridical spirit that permeated the “ecclesial conscience” of the Russian Church. Consequently, while outward reform was being discussed and debated, the need to reform the soul of the Church was ignored. Father Florovsky is among those critics who, like Afanassieff, saw that a true return to the law of the Spirit could not be accomplished solely by legislative and administrative change. “Everyone talked too much about

'interests' and influence, and they were too anxious about defending these interests and balancing these interests. The supporters of a broadly representative council did not have a very precise understanding of the nature of the Church, conceiving it as a kind of constitutional structure... It remains indisputable that attention focused almost exclusively on organizational reform. Few acknowledged the need for a spiritual awakening; few understood that the restoration of inner peace and order could not be achieved by Church politics, but only through spiritual and ascetic exploit. The only way out was precisely in [an] ascetic renaissance."^[21]

VII. Where Are We Going

The preceding ecclesiological configurations are guides requiring theological and historical interpretation. They are also signposts of caution. The crisis within the Orthodox Church in America offers it the possibility to recover its Christological and Pneumatological foundation, but in doing this we should be very careful not to impose the past on the present. We are not the Church sojourning in the 1st century. Neither are we the Church in Byzantium nor the Church in imperial Russia. We are the Church sojourning in America. Are we willing to meet the many challenges that this entails including the challenge of **re-establishing** and therefore **re-configuring** an ecclesiology of Eucharistic con-celebration in which bishop, priest and laity are driven by the ascetic tension of being in the world but not of the world? Are we willing to harvest and offer the fruits of this creative tension to the world for its life and salvation? Or, do we sojourn as a Church in which the celebration of the Eucharistic continues to have no substantial impact on our ecclesiology and consequently on our understanding and implementation of conciliarity? In many ways, it seems that the Eucharistic renaissance that continues in the OCA is more a conversion of the mind than of the heart. How else is one to explain an exclusively episcopal ecclesiology that has sparked a new wave of anti-clericalism, parochialism and individualism?

Reformation is an ascetic ordeal that reorganizes the personal and collective components of the Church so that all may strive to be in harmony with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit renews and refreshes the Church by giving Christ himself to the Church. "Watered by the Spirit we drink Christ", wrote Saint Athanasius of Alexandria.^[22] Exterior reorganization, while necessary, will collapse if it is not accompanied by an authentic conversion leading to a personal and communal reorganization of the mind and heart.

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^[1] "The Canonical Problem", St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly, 8, (1964), no. 2, pp. 67-85; "The Liturgical Problem" SVSQ, 8 (1964), no. 4, pp. 164-185; "The Spiritual Problem", SVSQ, 19, (1965), no.4, pp. 171-193.

- [2] See for example “Ecclesiastical Regionalism: Structures of Communion or Cause for Separation?” originally published in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 24 (1980), pp. 155-168. Reprinted in *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, New York, 1982, pp. 217-233.
- [3] *The Oecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church*, Thessaloniki, 1976, p. 28.
- [4] See Georges Florovsky, « Le Corps Du Christ Vivant », in *La Sainte Eglise Universelle : Confrontation Oecumenique*, Paris, 1948, pp. 9-57
- [5] Maximus of Sardis, op. cit. p. 27.
- [6] See Paul Nadim Tarazi, *Galatians: A Commentary*, New York, 1994, pp. 60ff. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1953, pp. 80-82.
- [7] Regarding freedom and equality in the Sub-Apostolic Church see, Hans von Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt und Geistliche Vollmacht*, Tübingen, 1953. Trans. J. A. Baker, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power In the Church of the First Three Centuries*, Stanford, 1969, p. 13.
- [8] See Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity Of Ohe Church In The Divine Eucharist And The Bishop During The First Three Centuries*, Brookline, MA, 200, pp. 107-194.
- [9] Campenhausen, op. cit. p. 86.
- [10] See Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, New York, 1984, pp. 173-194.
- [11] See Archiprete Nicolas Afanassieff, *L’Eglise Du Saint Esprit*, Paris, 1975, pp.101ff. Also his « Una Sancta », *Irenikon*, xxxvi, 4^e trimestre 1963, pp. 436-475.
- [12] Laodicea, canon 13.
- [13] See Robert F. Taft, S.J., “The Decline of Communion in Byzantium and the Distancing of the Congregation from the Liturgical Action: Cause, Effect, or Neither” in *Thresholds of the Sacred*, Sharon E.J. Gerstel, ed. Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 27-50.
- [14] Ibid. p.30. See also Apostolic Canon 9.
- [15] In Heb. 17:34, quoted by Taft, op. cit., p. 32.
- [16] St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ad. Haer. IV*, 18, 5
- [17] See Constantine Cavarnos, *St. Macarios of Corinth*, Belmont, MA, 1972, pp. 11-42
- [18] One of the most comprehensive and recent studies on the Council is Hyacinthe Destivelle’s *Le Concile de Moscou (1917-1918)*, Paris, 2006.
- [19] See Gregory L. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth Century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform*, Princeton, 1983, p. 469. Also, Georges Florovsky’s *Ways of Russian Theology*, Part II, Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987, p. 259-283.
- [20] Op. cit., p. 108.
- [21] Op. cit. pp.261, 265.
- [22] St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistle I to Serapion* in Florovsky’s *Le Corps Du Christ Vivant*, p. 19.