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THE PEOPLE OF GOD

THE UNITY AND THE GLORY THEREOF

A DISCUSSION OF JOHN 17:17–24 IN THE LIGHT OF PATRISTIC THOUGHT*

AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF THIS ADDRESS, I would like to say what a high honour and distinct privilege it is for me to be asked to deliver the annual lecture in commemoration of the faith and testimony of Father Georges Florovsky.

The protopresbyter Georges Florovsky was a man of great theological contribution, of genuine spiritual vision, and of humble pastoral *diakonia*. In the memory of those who had the privilege of knowing him, he will remain as “an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). In the hearts of those who have known him through his writings, he will be remembered as a theologian dedicated to bear witness to what we call “the Orthodox ethos”, or “the Orthodox way”. Both as a scholar and as a pastor, the late Father Georges Florovsky was a living testimony to patristic theology. His entire theological approach was according to the mind of the Fathers. His constant effort was to prove that the eternal strength of Orthodox theology lies in the patristic inheritance.

With the same intention, the Orthodox Theological Society of America, honouring his memory, projects the spirit and the passion, the life and the word of our Fathers. And, indeed, to transmit the spirit and the message of the patristic inheritance is, I believe, the

best service one can offer to modern man caught up as he is in his own self-sufficiency and futility.

Status of the Question

The stress on the patristic way, this supreme concern of Father Georges Florovsky, leads me to concentrate my attention on a theme which was often discussed by the Greek Fathers, and yet is not infrequently overlooked in our contemporary ecclesiastical life, despite the fact that it is often included in the agenda for our theological consultations. Living as we do in a society where emphasis is placed on programs and structures, we often understand the Church as an organism in the narrow sense. We pay less attention to the fact that she is a new totality, a new generation, a peculiar gathering of people, in which immense potentialities are offered to all. The world in which we live inflicts upon us a secular understanding of the Church. Thus, the fact that the Church, although in the world, is not of the world, frequently escapes our attention. In fact we do not always realize that the Church is the transcendence of the world.

When we consider the New Testament data more carefully and thoroughly we find ourselves in the presence of a new, glowing life. There is nothing in the world which offers any real parallel to this remarkable and unique life. The New Testament presents us with the possibility of realizing that ecclesiastical communion is the abolition, in the most radical way, of any worldly human communion, and is the creation of a new relationship. For me, this is summed up in the words of Christ himself: "I am come to send fire on the earth . . . Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, nay, but rather division. For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father, the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother, the mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Luke 12:49–53).¹

Before coming to grips with the issue I am going to discuss, I feel that it is necessary to say just a few words about the theme itself, and the way in which I intend to discuss it. My concern in this presentation

Although the theme of God's containing and penetrating his created beings has a philosophical background, namely Stoic and Neoplatonic,¹⁹ the patristic understanding of it goes beyond the philosophical approach. The unity is understood by the Fathers in purely biblical and theological terms. They did not speak of it in terms of speculation, but always and constantly within a soteriological context. In fact, it is the divine "emigration" and radiance of God, the trinitarian love, which calls created beings to share the divine unity and glory.

The Destructive Character of Sin

This original oneness and conjunction (συνάφεια) of the universe with God, the symphony (σύμπνοια), so to speak, of all beings with one another was dissolved by sin. In order to understand the unity of the people of God better it is necessary to say a few words about the destructive character of sin. Sin introduced discord and confusion into the created universe. Even the material world suffers its effects. Sin is understood in patristic anthropology as a catastrophe caused by the free will of intelligent beings. It is a turning away which causes the entire *cosmos* to break loose from its creator. The primordial vocation was for unity, but sin introduces division.

As a matter of fact, sin is a continuous decomposition, disorganization and dissolution of the unity created by God. It is a separation and disruption in the harmony of beings. The author of the Areopagite treatises speaks of sin as "an inharmonious mingling of discordant elements."²⁰ Thus, in the condition of sin, man is separated from God as well as from his fellow man. This means that in the final analysis, selfhood and hate are introduced instead of *eros* for the "other" person. It is in this sense that Jean-Paul Sartre spoke of the other as "hell" and "sin." "My original fall is the existence of the other."²¹ The sinful condition implies that man understands himself not as a person in connection with God and other human persons, but as an individual. Under the heavy yoke of time and space the individual man follows his own way which leads nowhere. The ideal of "my existence for the other, and the other's existence for me," is understood as an illusion, or rather as the condition for the exercise of a lie.²² From this perspective man is the being "who is what he

is not, and who is not what he is.”²³ In the condition of sin the first man, instead of “being with” the other, found himself in a stage of absolute isolation “at the east of the garden of Eden” (Gen. 3:24). The words of God addressed to him, “in the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread” (Gen. 3:19), describe the human tragedy of opposition to God and separation from him. Thus, by the free acceptance of sin, the innate connection between man and God was destroyed. And so man, instead of loving God and being his servant, in a world of which he was designated to be prophet, priest and king,²⁴ became an alien and a stranger. In fact, sin consists in the limitation of man to his individuality. It is a reduction of the human person within the limits of his own existence. Thus, through sin man became a stranger to his communion with God, a stranger to his fellowship with the human “other,” and even a stranger to himself. Sin, as a decomposition and separation, effects both the disorganization and the disruption of the human person itself.

The man of sin, in other words, is a divided personality. The original and innate unity of the human person is disrupted and dissolved by sin. I cannot find any clearer exposition of this division of the human person than that expounded by Paul in Romans 7:19–24.

For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

The Restoration of the Human Person

The decomposition of the human person affects the very structure of his being. It is, as Gregory of Nyssa would say, a real “*analysis*” of man.²⁵ The original unity of soul and body became uncertain and unstable through sin. In short, sin abolishes man as a person. It is a decomposition of his very being, it makes him live this divided and disorganized life only for himself, and thus it deprives him of the possibility of living in fellowship with others and with God. It is only through the self-emptying of the person of the Logos of God that a new creation

appointment. Neither presbyter, nor deacon nor any other in the ecclesiastical rank. The ordained must be designated to serve in a concrete ecclesial community of a city or of a village or of a martyr's sanctuary or of a monastery. The Holy Council has ordered that an ordination without a concrete appointment should be void and the person ordained should not have the right to serve anywhere. This punishment should be understood also as a disapproval of the bishop who ordained him."

The same is true of bishops. Assignment to a particular episcopal ministry is the *sine qua non* for his ordination. Bishop, priest and deacon alike should be assigned to a concrete diocese, or congregation. This spiritual relation is a kind of matrimonial connection. Thus, a cleric is appointed to serve the flock specifically assigned to him. In order to guarantee this unique communion between the ordained and his faithful the First Ecumenical Council in its 15th rule declared a direct prohibition for all clergy to move from one place to another. Neither a bishop, nor a priest, nor a deacon has the right to leave his place and go elsewhere.

Speaking of priesthood as a *diakonia* within the concrete ecclesial community we should underline the communal character of the ordination service itself. In any circumstance secret ordination is absolutely unacceptable.¹² Ordination is always an ecclesial *praxis*; a spiritual action realized within the body of the Christian community; it is open and public, before the community and together with the community. It is not performed by the bishop or the bishops alone, but by the bishop or the bishops, together with the other clergy and the congregation. In eastern ordinations the "Axios", the "Kyrie Eleison" and the "Amen", pronounced by the entire community, is not a mere ceremonial exaltation, but a responsible testimony and a way of expressing ecclesial approval. This ecclesial approval is shown in a direct way by the exclamation pronounced by the deacon, both to the Bishop and to the congregation, before the ordination ceremony begins: "give the command" (*keleuson* in the singular, but also *keleusate* in the plural). These exaltations have deep ecclesiological significance.

This means that the ordination is performed by the bishop or the bishops together with the entire people of God. The bishop is not acting alone, but as the person who has the sacramental power to ordain within and together with the Christian community. He is the person charismatically appointed to safeguard the unity of the Church, connecting, by what we call Apostolic Succession, the present with the initial fulfilment.

The canonical tradition of Eastern Christendom and the patristic treatises are full of evidences and indications that all ordinations are inseparably connected with a given community, and through this concrete community with the catholic ecclesial body. Approaching the ordination of a bishop from this perspective, we can infer that the participation of at least three bishops has substantial ecclesiological meaning. The 4th rule of the First Ecumenical Council prescribes that the ordination of a bishop should be performed by all bishops of the district, and if this is not possible, because of practical difficulties, by at least three. Each bishop takes part in the ordination of the new one as the representative and living presence of his entire flock; and each bishop is a visible image of the Catholic Church. Thus, the new bishop who is appointed to serve in a concrete diocese, through his ordination, is related to the whole Church. The ordination of a bishop does not simply convey to the newly ordained juridical privileges, but elevates him to the relational rank of a catholic person, and places him in the midst of the community as a living image and testimony of the ecclesial oneness.

The same applies to the ordination of a priest. Through his ordination the new presbyter is again existentially related, in a unique and specific way, to the entire Body of the Church, thus becoming himself an instrument for the edification of ecclesial unity. This means that the ordination of a presbyter is not an isolated sacramental action, in itself and for itself, but a sacramental and spiritual event related to the concrete community, and through it to the life of the whole Church. If we maintain that the Risen Lord remains present in the eucharistic community through the power of the Holy Spirit, and if we profess, as we have

in another, new light. Holy Scripture, created for the Church, transmits this new light to the faithful community.

Holy Scripture is begotten *for* the Church but also *in* the Church. This means that the Bible in its totality is a creation of the community. Both in the Old Testament and in the New it is the community that shows forth the sacred books. Indeed, it is a known fact that the Church had before herself many more historical, legal and other texts than those which she finally chose and considered as canonical. The Church being “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and “filled with the Holy Trinity”,³ proceeds to choose those works which had already been acknowledged by use, chiefly liturgical, within the ecclesiastical community.⁴ This choosing is a kind of seal. The Church chooses those texts which have been inter-woven into her life. She chooses, from a multitude of texts, those which are divinely inspired while she rejects others as “apocryphal” or characterizes them as “deuterocanonical”. Holy Scripture was given to the Church and the Church transmits it to the people as the authentic written rendition of the life-bearing message, which the incarnate Logos brought for the re-creation of all creation. The Church in defining the canon of Holy Scripture accepts and bears within herself “the Word of truth”. “The Word of truth” is acknowledged by the believing community, by the entire body of Christ. It is not an isolated and autonomous principle, alien to the Church. Holy Scripture and the Church cannot be separated. One is contained in the other (*perichoresis*), one depends upon the other. Holy Scripture is created for the Church and the Church is the basis for its genesis.

Those who separate Holy Scripture from the Church come to the false conclusion that either Scripture is superior to the Church or that the Church is superior to Holy Scripture. The first opinion one finds among Protestant theologians, while the latter is to be found in Roman Catholic theology. This hyperbole leads to an alteration of the meaning of the Church, that is, either to an under-evaluation (subordination) or to an over-evaluation. By placing the Bible over and above the Church we destroy the