

UNIT 3C: MINISTRIES AND MISSION

86: Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology Ad Intra

Orthodox ecclesiology is the Orthodox understanding of the Church. Thus, it is important to appreciate with Father John Anthony McGuckin that:

Although we live in a world where the very concept and term ‘church’ has become bureaucratized and formalized, so that most people would immediately think of either a building or an administrative society when they hear the word, the Orthodox have retained the older and infinitely more dynamic understanding of church which is found in the Scriptures. These describe the church as a mystery in the ‘life of Christ’—a society of believers, certainly, but more fundamentally, the extended power of Christ’s saving work as manifested and concretized in the world, and in the next age. The [C]hurch, rooted as it is in this age, yet moving already out of it to its transcendent destiny with the glorified Christ, is at heart an eschatological mystery that cannot entirely be at home in the present world order, and cannot fully be glimpsed within it.¹

Within this framework, Father John concludes a valuable 30-page analysis of the Church by citing John 13:34-35 (“love one another, even as I have loved you”) and emphasising that “Christ’s truth is not always preserved by the strictures of logic, but rather is captured in the expansiveness of love.”

In seeking to understand the fullness of this love, there are two perspectives in the study of Orthodox ecclesiology: the study of the Church from inwards (*ad intra*), that is, the inner life of the Church grounded in the Trinity, and the study of the Church outwards (*ad extra*), that is, the Church in relation to the world now and at the end of time. At some point in the overlap between these two modes of being, (in God and in the world), a boundary within the Church is crossed. This

¹ Father John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Chichester, West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 238.

boundary is like the limit of the observable universe beyond which it extends to its totality. We know that there are regions of the universe beyond this limit, but since we cannot see them, we must remain content to affirm their existence from the limited data that is available to us.

In like manner, we can conceive a boundary within the Church beyond which we cannot see directly, being unable within the limits of revelation to map the full extent of the Church with any precision. This arises from a fundamental starting point in Orthodoxy that the extent of the Church is known only to God, because this has been neither fully realised nor revealed. “For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). We might more reliably say that the confidence that one is “in” the Church declines as certain marks of the Church’s unity are removed, but this is a matter of degree and still not easily resolved.² Such marks might include continuity in apostolic tradition and relational communion in that faith and life. Greater clarity emerges when we study *both* the “ad intra” (inner life) and “ad extra” (boundary conditions) aspects. This we shall now do in a study of two great works by two outstanding contemporary Orthodox theologians, Father Alexander Schmemmann and Father George Florovsky.

[The original texts below, retained largely without comment, are in black, with key sections of those text highlighted in dark red, while the additional commentary from this lecture is in blue. Neither lecture is given fully here. For the full texts, please follow the links in the footnotes.]

² In an insightful note in *The Orthodox Church*, Father John points out that: “It is precisely because the [C]hurch is the body of the saved that the old aphorism took its force: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Outside the [C]hurch—no salvation), though the Latin ought more accurately to be rendered, ‘Outside the [C]hurch—no safety.’ Note 207, p. 270. Metropolitan Kallistos made a similar point in his lectures at the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies at Cambridge when he noted that there is a sign at the end of the train platform at Oxford, “Danger of death: Do not proceed beyond this point,” and then suggested that theologians should adopt a similar attitude in considering whether everyone will be saved.

from: Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann - Ecclesiological notes³

1. One of the greatest "ecumenical" difficulties the Orthodox Church has is that her thought forms and "terms of reference" are different from those of the West. And, since the ecumenical movement was shaped primarily by Western theological presuppositions and antecedents, its Orthodox participants were, from the very beginning, forced to express their positions and points of view within a theological framework alien to, or at least different from, the Orthodox tradition. This is especially true of ecclesiology. The Orthodox East has not been challenged either by the politico-ecclesiological controversies typical of the Western Middle Ages or by the Reformation. It remained free, therefore, from the "polemical" and "definitional" ecclesiology which underlies the Western *De Ecclesia*, whether in its Roman Catholic or Protestant form, and which conditions to a great degree the ecumenical debate on the Church. In our own "sources"—the Fathers, the Councils, the Liturgy—we do not find any formal definition of the Church. This is not because of any lack of ecclesiological interest and consciousness, but because the Church (in the Orthodox approach to her) does not exist, and therefore cannot be defined, apart from the very content of her life. The Church, in other terms, is not an "essence" or "being" distinct, as such, from God, man, and the world, but is the very reality of *Christ in us* and *us in Christ*, a new mode of God's presence and action in His creation, of creation's life in God. She is God's gift and man's response and appropriation of this gift. She is union and unity, knowledge, communion and transfiguration. And, since apart from the "content" the "form" has no meaning (*cf.* the reluctance of Orthodox theologians to discuss problems of "validity"), Orthodox ecclesiology rather than precise definitions or forms, conditions and modalities, is an attempt to present an *icon* of the Church as *life in Christ*—an icon

³ Paper read at the Institute for Contemporary Theology, Montreal, July 1965. *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1967, pp. 35-39. For a full transcript see: <http://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/ecclesiological-notes.html>

which to be adequate and true must draw on all aspects and not only on the institutional ones of the Church. For the Church is an *institution*, but she is also a *mystery*, and it is mystery that gives meaning and life to institution and is, therefore, the object of ecclesiology.

We encounter here a key aspect of Orthodox ecclesiology in that the life in Christ by the Spirit generates and transforms the institutional aspect. However, although Father Alexander writes some two years after the Second Vatican Council, he has not recognised the slight but significant paradigm shift in *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*) which states right from the outset: “... the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race ...”⁴ There is a tendency in contemporary Orthodox theology to emphasise those elements of faith and practice that from an historical perspective have distinguished the Latin West from the Greek East. This is understandable, but we do owe to our ecumenical colleagues (Protestants as well as Catholics) the respect of dealing with their actual teachings as they exist now rather than in the 16th Century. Much still separates us, but empirically speaking I think it would be extremely difficult to justify the view that only Orthodoxy presents the life in Christ as expressing “Church.”

5. In this world the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church manifests itself as a plurality of churches, each one of which is both a part and a whole. It is a part because only in unity with all churches and in obedience to the universal truth can it be the Church; yet it is also a whole because in each church, by virtue of her unity with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, the whole Christ is present, the fullness of grace is given, the catholicity of new life is revealed.⁵ The visible unity

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

⁵ It should be noted that Father Alexander’s emphasis that “the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church manifests itself as a plurality of churches, each of which is both a part and a whole” forms a radical contemporary challenge to the Orthodox Church as well as to the Catholic and Protestant Churches—radical to the Orthodox because non-Orthodox Churches are linked to the Apostolic Church to the degree that they have preserved some share in the faith, sacramental structure, and unity of life of that (Orthodox) Church, and radical to the non-Orthodox because the Orthodox

of all churches as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is expressed and preserved in the unity of faith, the unity of sacramental structure, and the unity of life. The unity of faith has its norm and content in the universal tradition. The unity of sacramental structure is preserved through the apostolic succession, which is the visible and objective continuity of the Church's life and order in time and space. The unity of life manifests itself in the active concern of all churches for each other and of all them together for the Church's mission in the world.

6. The organ of unity in the Church is the episcopate. "The Church is in the Bishop." This means that in each church the personal ministry of the bishop is to preserve the fullness of the Church, i.e., her identity and continuity with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; to be the teacher of the universal traditions; the offerer of the Eucharist which is the sacrament of unity; and the pastor of the people of God on its pilgrimage to the Kingdom. By virtue of his consecration by other bishops and of his belonging to the universal episcopate, he *represents*, he makes present and unites his church to all churches and *represents* all other churches, and therefore the whole Church, to his own church. In him each church is thus truly a part of the whole Church and the whole Church is truly present in each church. In the Orthodox tradition, the unity of the episcopate, and especially the organ of this unity, a synod or council of bishops, is the supreme expression of the Church's teaching and pastoral function - the inspired mouth of the whole Church. But, "The Bishop is in the Church," and this means that neither one bishop nor the episcopate as a whole are above the Church, or (to quote here a famous formula) can⁶ act and teach *ex sese et non ex consensu Ecclesiae* [*“from himself and not from the consensus of the Church”*]. It is rather the bishop's complete identification with and his total obedience to the *consensus Ecclesiae*, to her teaching, life, and holiness, as well as his organic unity with the people of God, that

unity of faith, sacramental structure and life remains a relevant universal measure for the life of all Churches.

⁶ I think that the transcript misses a verb here, because “can” is suggested from the context.

makes the bishop the teacher and the guardian of the truth. For in the Church, no one is without the Holy Spirit; and according to the Encyclical of Eastern Patriarchs, the preservation of the truth is entrusted to the whole people of the Church. Thus the Church is both hierarchical and conciliary, and the two principles are not only not opposed to each other but are in their interdependence essential for the full expression of the mystery of the Church.

7. The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church must necessarily exist in the world as an orderly and visibly-united Church Universal, and it is the function and charism of the *primacies* to serve as centres of communion, unity, and coordination. There exist local and regional primacies (metropolitans, patriarchs) and a universal primacy. Orthodox ecclesiology has never denied that traditionally the latter belonged to the Church of Rome. It is, however, the interpretation of this primacy in terms of a personal infallibility of the Roman pontiff and of his universal jurisdiction power that led to its rejection by the Orthodox East.

It is in these sections of Father Alexander's analysis that Orthodox ecclesiology finds its most practical expression, because if the inner life of the Church is construed exclusively as a mystical union without the relational aspects of *koinonia* (community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy) and apostolic authority then credence could be given to the idea that Orthodox ecclesiology is essentially Gnostic, and has some type of secret knowledge that is not available to the non-Orthodox. This is not the case, as Fr. Alexander makes clear: "The visible unity of all churches as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is expressed and preserved in the unity of faith, the unity of sacramental structure, and the unity of life." Yet, we must be honest before God about our beloved Church. Although we may not be culpable of ecclesiological Gnosticism in practice ... since bishops and autocephalous churches are all too ready to assert their "rights" in terms of the canonical order of their constituent communities. It is precisely this sectarian assertion that leads to the monstrosity of phyletism (from the Greek, *phulē*, tribe) whereby the institutional aspect is deformed to accommodate nationalisms, and

yes, racisms of the most heinous kind. Conciliarity unbalanced by an international collective primacy is particularly vulnerable to such deformations of our universal common life in Christ into fragmented tribalisms of state and culture. This is not an argument for transforming the Ecumenical Patriarchate into an Orthodox papacy modelled on Roman Catholic lines, but rather an indictment of our inability (a sinful lack of will only) to honour the principle of Orthodox unity in actual practice both at the synodal and primatial levels. A start has been made to address some of these issues in the convening of episcopal assemblies where such overlapping dioceses exist, but much more remains to be done.

In considering the Church *ad intra*, it is also important to remember that:

The church began by understanding itself as the continuation of God’s people of Israel, the people whose life together is constituted by their covenant with God, as manifest in their history with God, their common worship and scriptures and in laws governing their social life. Their history shows ‘God’s method of bringing unity to the human race beset with the disorder of sin’⁷ and his intention to extend this to the nations of the world. For Christians, this is fulfilled in the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ, in whom the Church is constituted as the new Israel, and God’s purposes for human society are accomplished. There all human beings and nations—every nation, Jew and Gentile, male or female, bond or free (Gal 3:28)—are to be brought into unity.⁸

⁷ See Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson, 2009).

⁸ Daniel W. Hardy, formerly Van Mildert Professor of Divinity, University of Durham, “church” in Adrian Hastings (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 119. Hardy contends that: “The common tradition of church understanding finds the basis of true social life, not only for Christians but for humanity, in the history of the covenant of God with Israel focused in the new covenant made in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and continued in the church. In so far as the church fulfils this mandate, it is the primary manifestation of the ‘economy of salvation’ and embodies the intensity of God’s Trinitarian life in the extensity of social life in the world, both in time and in eternity.” p 121. This integration of Jewish and Christian theology would be controversial to many, both Jews and Christians; however, Hardy’s

Thus the earlier experience of the Jewish people, both with human sin and God's grace, confronts the contemporary Church with a model of ecclesiology in search of unity.

Ecclesiology Ad Extra

from: Georges Florovsky: The Limits of the Church⁹

It is very difficult to give an exact and firm definition of a 'sect' or 'schism' (I distinguish the theological definition from the simple canonical description), since a sect in the Church is always something contradictory and unnatural, a paradox and an enigma. For the Church is unity, and the whole of her being is in this unity and union, of Christ and in Christ. 'For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body' (1 Cor. 12.13), and the prototype of this unity is the consubstantial Trinity. The measure of this unity is catholicity or communality (*sobornost*), where the impenetrability of personal consciousness is softened—and even removed—in complete unity of thought and soul, and the multitude of them that believe are of one heart and soul (cf. Acts 4.32). A sect, on the other hand, is separation, solitariness, the loss and denial of communality. The sectarian spirit is the direct opposite of the Church spirit.

The question of the nature and meaning of divisions and sects in the Church was put in all its sharpness as early as the ancient baptismal disputes of the third century. At that time St Cyprian of Carthage developed with fearless consistency a doctrine of the complete absence of grace in every sect, precisely as a sect. The whole meaning and the whole logical stress of his reasoning lay in the conviction that the sacraments are established in the Church. That is to say, they are effected and can be effected only in the Church, in communion and in communality.

central point that the Church "began by understanding itself as the continuation of God's people of Israel" is unquestionably correct.

⁹ Church Quarterly Review, 1933 <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/crete-01-e.html>

Therefore every violation of communality and unity in itself leads immediately beyond the last barrier into some decisive 'outside'. To St Cyprian every schism was a departure out of the Church, out of that sanctified and holy land where alone there rises the baptismal spring, the waters of salvation, *quia una est aqua in ecclesia sancta* (Epist. lxxi, 2).

The teaching of St Cyprian as to the gracelessness of sects is only the opposite side of his teaching about unity and communality. This is not the place or the moment to recollect and relate Cyprian's deductions and proofs. Each of us remembers and knows them, is bound to know them, is bound to remember them. They have not lost their force to this day. The historical influence of Cyprian was continuous and powerful. Strictly speaking, in its theological premises the teaching of St Cyprian has never been disproved. Even Augustine was not very far from Cyprian. He argued with the Donatists, not with Cyprian himself, and did not try to refute Cyprian; indeed, his argument was more about practical measures and conclusions. In his reasoning about the unity of the Church, about the unity of love as a necessary and decisive condition for the saving power of the sacraments, Augustine really only repeats Cyprian in new words.

But the practical conclusions drawn by Cyprian have not been accepted and supported by the consciousness of the Church. One may ask how this was possible, if his premises have been neither disputed nor set aside. There is no need to enter into the details of the Church's canonical relations with sectarians and heretics; it is an imprecise and an involved enough story. It is sufficient to state that there are occasions when, by her very actions, the Church gives one to understand that the sacraments of sectarians—and even of heretics—are valid, that the sacraments can be celebrated outside the strict canonical limits of the Church. The Church customarily receives adherents from sects—and even from heresies—not by the way of baptism, thereby obviously meaning or supposing that they have already been actually baptized in their sects and heresies. In many cases the Church receives adherents even without chrism, and sometimes also clergy in their existing orders.

All the more must this be understood and explained as recognizing the validity or reality of the corresponding rites performed over them ‘outside the Church’.

If sacraments are performed, however, it can only be by virtue of the Holy Spirit, and canonical rules thus establish or reveal a certain mystical paradox. In what she does the Church bears witness to the extension of her mystical territory even beyond her canonical borders: the ‘outside world’ does not begin immediately. St Cyprian was right: The sacraments are accomplished only in the Church. But he defined this ‘in’ hastily and too narrowly. Must we not rather argue in the opposite direction? Where the sacraments are accomplished, there is the Church. St Cyprian started from the silent supposition that the canonical and charismatic limits of the Church invariably coincide, and it is his unproven equation that has not been confirmed by the communal consciousness of the Church.

As a mystical organism, as the sacramental Body of Christ, the Church cannot be adequately described in canonical terms or categories alone. It is impossible to state or discern the true limits of the Church simply by canonical signs or marks. Very often the canonical boundary determines the charismatic boundary as well, and what is bound on earth is bound by an indissoluble bond in heaven. But not always. And still more often, not immediately. In her sacramental, mysterious being the Church surpasses all canonical norms. For that reason a canonical cleavage does not immediately signify mystical impoverishment and desolation. All that Cyprian said about the unity of the Church and the sacraments can be and must be accepted. But it is not necessary to draw with him the final boundary around the body of the Church by means of canonical points alone.

The honesty of Fr. Georges in respect of the “limits of the Church” is both striking and reassuring to common experience. To repeat: “St Cyprian started from the silent supposition that the canonical and charismatic limits of the Church invariably coincide, and it is his unproven equation that has not been confirmed by the communal consciousness of the Church.” Of course, many have tried to establish the precise nature of this “equation” between “the canonical and

charismatic limits of the Church” simply by reasserting it and making it a touchstone of a “true” Orthodoxy as against all sorts of supposed ecumenist “heresies.” This is tantamount to scaring little children into conformity by threats of “the bogeyman.” Of course, an equation which offers the same boundaries for the canonical and charismatic limits of the Church (“an equation of boundaries,” it could be called), makes for a much tidier definition of “Church” but at the risk of limiting God’s grace and providential mercy, quite contrary to both Orthodox faith and life experience. Much of what follows in Fr. Georges’ essay is a useful commentary on how the Orthodox Church has exercised its pastoral discretion balancing the strict and the pastoral application of its rites for the reconciliation of schismatics and heretics. However, it is only toward the end of his essay that he answers the difficult issue of what lies beyond the canonical boundary of the Church, “ad extra” as it were. This question will be examined in greater depth in Lecture 87 on “Ecumenism.” For now, it is interesting to observe that this traditionally minded and open-hearted Orthodox theologian resorts to St Augustine rather than St Cyprian to solve this problem, even if he does try to close the gap between the two! I am not sure though that St Augustine’s distinction between validity and efficaciousness in heterodox or schismatic sacraments is very helpful. If one speaks in these terms, I doubt that one could have the former without the latter. Yet, I am not convinced by a rigid interpretation of St Cyprian’s ecclesiology either. Perhaps we have to wait for God to show us the way forward on this issue whilst maintaining charity and as much unity as we can with our “separated brethren.” Let us return to Fr. Georges’ assessment:

One thing remains obscure. How does the activity of the Spirit continue beyond the canonical borders of the Church? What is the validity of sacraments without communion, of stolen garments, sacraments in the hands of usurpers? For Augustine, it was not so important that the sacraments of the schismatics are ‘unlawful’ or ‘illicit’ (illicita); much more important is the fact that schism is a dissipation of love. But the love of God can overcome the failure of love in man. In the sects themselves—and even among the heretics—the Church continues to

perform her saving and sanctifying work. It may not follow, perhaps, that we should say that schismatics are still in the Church. In any case, this would not be precise and sounds equivocal. It would be truer to say that the Church continues to work in the schisms in expectation of that mysterious hour when the stubborn heart will be melted in the warmth of God's prevenient grace, when the will and thirst for communality and unity will finally burst into flame. The 'validity' of sacraments among schismatics is the mysterious guarantee of their return to Catholic plenitude and unity. The sacramental theology of St Augustine was not received by the Eastern Church in antiquity nor by Byzantine theology, but not because they saw in it something alien or superfluous. Augustine was simply not very well known in the East. In modern times the doctrine of the sacraments has not infrequently been expounded in the Orthodox East, and in Russia, on a Roman model, but there has not yet been a creative appropriation of Augustine's conception.

Contemporary Orthodox theology must express and explain the traditional canonical practice of the Church in relation to heretics and schismatics on the basis of those general premises which have been established by Augustine.

It is necessary to hold firmly in mind that in asserting the 'validity' of the sacraments and of the hierarchy itself in the sects, St Augustine in no way relaxed or removed the boundary dividing sect and communality. This is not so much a canonical as a spiritual boundary: communal love in the Church and separatism and alienation in the schism. For St Augustine this was the boundary of salvation, since grace operates outside communality but does not save.¹⁰

¹⁰ To this author, St Augustine's distinction does not make much sense. Why would God do anything that had no real value? There is a specious casuistry involved here, possibly due to the unresolved tension between Cyprianic rigour and pastoral economy in St Augustine's thought.

From this it follows without a doubt that the so-called ‘branch’¹¹ theory is unacceptable. This theory depicts the cleavages of the Christian world in too complacent and comfortable a manner. The onlooker may not be able immediately to discern the schismatic ‘branches’ from the Catholic trunk.

In its essence, moreover, a schism is not just a branch. It is also the will for schism. It is the mysterious and even enigmatic sphere beyond the canonical limits of the Church, where the sacraments are still celebrated and where hearts often still burn in faith, in love and in works. We must admit this, but we must remember that the limit is real, that unity does not exist.

These are difficult words for those Christians, whether Orthodox or non-Orthodox, who claim to belong to what they term “the Orthodox Catholic Church” without having a care to mend the schisms that still separate. The test of good faith here is the readiness to put right what is amiss, but that requires charity and diligence as much from the Orthodox as from the heterodox. Thus ecclesiology—the study and knowledge of the Church—is not a dried and theoretical study but a lived experience of the Church as a community founded by Jesus Christ, a living, dynamic structure that guides its members, however they may be defined canonically or charismatically, to oneness with Christ.

¹¹ The “branch theory” is an ecclesiology often favoured by the Anglican Church, perhaps from the time of Richard Hooker (1554-1600) but certainly as expressed in the writings of the 19th century William Palmer.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines it thus: “...the theory that, though the Church may have fallen into schism within itself and its several provinces or groups of provinces be out of communion with each other, each may yet be a branch of the one Church of Christ, provided that it continues to hold the faith of the original undivided Church and to maintain the Apostolic Succession of its bishops. Such, it is contended by many Anglican theologians, is the condition of the Church at the present time, there being now three main branches, the Roman, the Eastern, and the Anglican Communions...”

Conclusion: How the Church Knows Itself in the Past, Present and Future

The two perspectives set out in this lecture of the study of the Church from inwards (*ad intra*), that is, the inner life of the Church grounded in the Trinity, and the study of the Church outwards (*ad extra*), that is, the Church in relation to the world now and at the end of time, enable the Church to know itself through the experience of its sacred history and Tradition being one with Christ in the past, the present and the future. Father John Anthony McGuckin reflects:

... Orthodoxy ‘knows itself’, through the paths of its own sacred history on earth. It is the [C]hurch of the apostles and Fathers, continuing on its journey; aware of its own times and conditions, and ready to respond to them, but always out of the continuously preserved heritage of its communion with the ancient saints. This communion is something that is a spiritual bond, as well as a doctrinal harmony. The saints of the past, and the [C]hurch of the present, have this harmony of love, and belief, and teaching, precisely because they have, as their innermost inspiration and communion, the self-same love of the Lord as inspired in them by the same grace of the Holy Spirit. The [C]hurch knows itself because it knows its Lord who called it into being as the [C]hurch, and knows [H]im as living in the present moment by the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the soul of the [C]hurch.¹²

This pattern by which the Church “knows itself” because it has been “called ... into being” by the Lord is a continuing experience for the Church and for each of us as we travel along our own paths of self-knowledge, divine illumination and salvation as members of the Church.

¹² *The Orthodox Church*, p. 239.

