

The Church - an Icon of the Holy Trinity

A talk given by Father Michael Harper at a Forward in Faith Conference at the University of York, 7th July 1998

And God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Ephesians 1:22-23

The Church is an image of the Holy Trinity

Vladimir Lossky *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*

Christianity is an imitation of the divine nature

Saint Gregory of Nyssa *De professione christiana*

I trust you will agree that at a Conference in the City of York it is not inappropriate to begin by re-calling the work and writings of the late Canon David Watson, whose preaching abilities filled York Minster on numerous occasions, and whose books were read all over the world. His Church, St Michael-le-Belfry, within the shadow of the Minster, was nearly always filled to the rafters. His untimely death at the age of 51 in 1984 was a great loss to the Anglican Communion.

One of his books published in 1978, was called *I believe in the Church*.¹ He describes it as "the most difficult book I have yet written". In the opening paragraph he quotes a student's placard he had seen, JESUS - YES! CHURCH - NO! He comments, "the growing enthusiasm for Jesus seems tragically offset by the almost total disenchantment with the Church."¹¹

In our so called post-modern culture, the dichotomy between Christ and the Church is even more accentuated. But it is by no means a modern phenomenon. Soren Kierkegaard spoke in his day of "the general regard for Jesus, and the general dislike of the Church."

One can see from this book of his that David Watson did have an ecclesiology. Unlike many of his Evangelical colleagues he did treat the Church seriously. When I was a young Evangelical, there were not a few leaders who made it plain to us that Heathrow airport was for them the boundary of Anglicanism.

Outside the United Kingdom the nearest Evangelical Church would do just as well, whether it was Presbyterian, Baptist or Lutheran. Sadly, on the whole, Evangelicals do not treat ecclesiology seriously, and Charismatics even less so. Thus many are indifferent about the Church, but enthusiastic about Christ and the Holy Spirit. The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Nicene Creed either does not exist, or if it does, it is not to be taken too seriously.

In Chapter 7 of his book, David Watson writes about the Body of Christ.¹⁴¹ He describes it as “a picture of the Church” and a “metaphor”, and so not to be literally applicable. To him it is merely an “apt phrase”. Rather uncharacteristically he firmly attacks those who would identify Christ and the Church. “To identify Christ with the Church is a dangerous extension of a powerful analogy, and it can lead to much confusion over the question of authority”. The verb “identify”, which he uses here, fails to do justice to this relationship. For the Church is a Christological reality. But even if we do use this verb, I have come to exactly the opposite conclusion. I would say, if you *don't* identify the two it leads to the confusion David Watson wanted to avoid. Our contemporary situation demonstrates this. On the other hand, if you accept the “identity”, which I shall be doing in this paper, the question of authority no longer poses a serious problem.

Ten years before David Watson's book, I wrote one called *Walk in the Spirit*. Hodders sent the manuscript to the late Dr. Cleverly Ford, who advised them not to publish it. However, Edward England had just joined Hodders, and asked me if I knew of anyone else who might give a second opinion, and I recommended Simon Barrington-Ward, then Dean of Magdalene College, Cambridge, whom I knew personally. He has just retired as Bishop of Coventry. He endorsed the book, and I was given an advance of £50! The book became a world best seller. In looking at the manuscript Bishop Simon suggested I should tighten up some of the statements about the Church, which I was glad to do. In the book I wrote, “the Church is the Body of Christ. It is important to notice that Paul does not say that the local church is *like* Jesus' Body, but that it *is*” (1 Cor 12:27).

This briefest of statements nevertheless underlines what was for me, since the early 60s, a vital part of any understanding of the Church. Just as Archbishop William Temple “saw the light” about the Resurrection, Virgin Birth and Trinity, according to his biographer F A Iremonger, “at a second of time during a symphony concert at the Queen's Hall”^{1v} so I too in a sudden flash saw that the Church IS the Body of Christ, and this has affected my thinking to this day.

Unfortunately the Queen's Hall was demolished by a German bomb in World War 2,

otherwise it might be a good place to take some other Anglican bishops one can think of! In a way, when I had that experience, although I did not know it at the time, I had booked my ticket and started on my journey towards Orthodoxy. It was to colour all my thinking about the Church, ecumenism, the *charismata*, and the action of the Holy Spirit.

But indifference to the doctrine of the Church is even more prevalent amongst Evangelicals today. The Very Revd Peter Broadbent has written in *New Directions*, "many of us prefer to be Presbyterian or Baptist when we go to the United States. The balance of power is now shifting from the diocese to the parish (is it?!) and our ecclesiology will have to be modified in order to catch up with reality". Thus we see a way of thinking which is perfectly prepared to modify ecclesiology, but which would be horrified at the suggestion of modifying Christology. Such a dichotomy is impossible for the Orthodox, in which both belong together, as we shall see. Saint John of Kronstadt, a Russian priest who died in 1912, once wrote, "the Church is one and the same with the Lord - His Body, of His flesh and of His bones. . . never think of the Church apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, and from the Father and Holy Spirit."

The historical background

It is important for us to understand that the Orthodox Church's journey through history has been along a different route to that of the Western Churches - Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant. The Orthodox Church did not pass through the western territories of Scholasticism, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Biblical Criticism, Fundamentalism, or Pentecostalism. When people talk about our generation being post-modern, one has to say that the Orthodox Church hasn't even reached modernity yet! Obviously all this affects Church agendas. Ecclesiology, for example, was high on the agenda of the Protestant Reformers, but not on that of the Orthodox; but one must hasten to add - not because it was unimportant, but because it was non-controversial.

We can see, therefore, that the Orthodox Church in her history, at least until the 20th Century, always had a received and assumed ecclesiology. It did not need to be examined too closely because it was largely non-controversial. But the 20th Century has somewhat changed this situation. The Ecumenical Movement, in which the Orthodox Church has played (at least until recently) an increasingly active role, has brought Orthodoxy into regular contact with other Churches and so forced it to face up to ecclesiological questions. It is worth recording that at the Edinburgh Conference in 1912, which effectively launched the Ecumenical Movement,

Orthodox people were present, though none from the Roman Catholic Church. The other factor of importance is the Orthodox diaspora, the large numbers of Orthodox people from Eastern Europe and the Middle East who have emigrated principally to Western Europe, North and South America, but also to many other parts of the world. It is worth noting that one of the largest church buildings in San Paulo, Brazil, is our Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral.

Thus through ecumenism and emigration, the Orthodox Church has been forced to think through its position on ecclesiology. And thus we have the fine writings on this subject by men like Vladimir Lossky, Georges Florovsky, and Alexander Schmemmann.

I have said about Orthodox ecumenism “at least until recently”, as there is now, particularly in the Russian Federation and its former territories, a backlash against ecumenism. The evidence for this can be seen in the Churches which have left the World Council of Churches, including the Church of Georgia and more recently the Church of Bulgaria. Others likely to follow suit are the Church of Serbia and possibly the Moscow Patriarchate. A recent sign of the increasing anti-western phobia in Russia has been the deplorable incident of the burning of the books of John Meyendorff and Alexander Schmemmann at the instigation of the Russian Orthodox Bishop Nikon.

It has, therefore, to be understood that the *sitz im leben* of Orthodoxy is different from that of the western Church. Alexander Schmemmann touched on this issue when he wrote about the World Council of Churches

The important fact of Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement and in the encounter - after so many centuries of almost total separation - between the Orthodox and the West is precisely that the Orthodox *were not given a choice*; that from the beginning they were assigned, not only seats but a certain place, role and function within the ecumenical movement. These “assignments” were based on western, theological and church presuppositions and categories, and they reflected the western origin of the ecumenical idea itself. We joined a movement, entered a debate, took part in a search whose basic terms of reference were already defined and taken for granted. Thus, even before we could realise it, we were caught in the essential dichotomies - Catholic versus Protestant, horizontal versus vertical, authority versus freedom, hierarchical versus congregational - and were made into representatives and bearers of attitudes and positions which we hardly recognised as ours and which were deeply alien to our traditions.
Church World Mission^{vi.1}

Finally, by way of introduction, I would like to reflect on the accusation often levelled at the Orthodox Church that her ecclesiology and principle of unity is

“political, non-religious, and not truly universal” to quote the words of Fr Yves Congar in his book *Divided Christendom*^{viii}. Thus Bishop Graham Leonard, shortly after the decision to ordain women to the priesthood, dismissed in one paragraph the Orthodox option in an article in the *Times* (20th November 1992)

A second option is to seek hospitality from the Eastern Orthodox Church. While they are very sympathetic, they are so closely related in this country to the indigenous churches of which they are part that it is difficult to see this as a realistic possibility.

But as Lossky points out “the view which would base the unity of a local church on a political, racial or cultural principle is considered by the Orthodox Church as a heresy, specially known by the name of *philetism*.” It was condemned by the Synod of Constantinople in 1872.

One of the Orthodox pioneers in this opening up of Orthodoxy is His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius of Antioch. It is he, above all, who has encouraged a new understanding of pan-cultural Orthodoxy, and who has supported to the hilt the establishing of a British Orthodox presence in this country. Writing in 1985 with a focus on Latin America, he said^{ix}

I would say we need an Orthodoxy which is free from its original sociological context. . . No doubt since Orthodoxy is so intimately linked with the life and the culture of the people who practise it, we would have to ask ourselves what remains of Orthodoxy if all these elements are taken from it. *And yet it does seem that what is essential still remains. It is this essential core which has often been obscured by the dross of history, but has, nevertheless, been the leaven in the history of our people.*

We must be able to present an Orthodoxy which has a universal character, an Orthodoxy which is *catholic* in the original meaning of the word, and not several different Orthodoxies that tend to reduce themselves to the historical and cultural contexts in which they were originally rooted. Latin America will accept a Latin Orthodoxy. What is wanted is an autochthonous (original) indigenous Orthodoxy. Why not let one develop?

He goes on

I have the impression that in all that we Orthodox do we tend to drag the present towards the past, instead of pulling the past toward the present. . . We have not properly grasped the implications of transition from the *oikoumene* of an Empire (Byzantium) to an *oikoumene* that truly takes in the whole world. We have behaved as if the one necessarily evolves into the other. But in fact there is a new dimension in Orthodoxy today which has not been taken into account.

In some ways the Orthodox are as uncomfortable with the word “Eastern”, the title

usually afforded to them, as Catholics with the word "Roman". Both words are misleading as descriptions of these Churches at this present time.

Orthodox Ecclesiology: an Introduction

To start with a formal Orthodox definition of the Church is impossible. As Florovsky writes, "Strictly speaking there is no definition which could claim doctrinal authority. None can be found in the Fathers. No definition has been given by the Ecumenical Councils"* He goes on, "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 will find no chapter on the Church in any of the early presentations of Christian doctrine in Origen, Saint Gregory of Nyssa or Saint John of Damascus. Many modern scholars, both Orthodox and Roman, suggest that the Church itself has not yet defined her essence and nature. As Florovsky says, "the Mystery is apprehended only by faith".^{x1}

Father Yves Congar in his book quoted earlier, speaks of the "relatively feeble development of ecclesiology by the Greek Fathers", and goes on to say that their emphasis was rather on Christology and still more on Pneumatology. Lossky picks on this to make a fundamental point, "there is a sense in which Father Congar is right: Eastern theology never thinks of the Church apart from Christ and from the Holy Spirit". However, such an understanding does not deserve the adjective "feeble"; indeed as we shall see it is the main source of the strength of her ecclesiology. One is bound to say again that the neglect of this in the western Church, both Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant, is a major reason for the confusion which often reigns on this subject.

In his brilliant essay, *The Lost scriptural mind*, Florovsky defends the ancient authorities. "I have often a strange feeling," he writes, "when I read the ancient classics of Christian theology, the fathers of the church, I find them more relevant to the troubles and problems of my own time than the production of modern theologians. . . I would risk a suggestion that St Athanasius and St Augustine are much more up to date than many of our theological contemporaries. The reason is very simple, they were dealing with things (realities) and not with the maps, they were concerned not so much with what man can believe as with what God has done for man. . ." ^{x11}

As we now turn to specific issues, with such a huge subject, it would be impossible in the compass of this paper to cover every dimension of the Church. I am thus concentrating on the most essential and foundational aspects. I will not, for example,

be able to cover the sacramental life of the Church, nor the important role played by the episcopate, and the priesthood.

The Church - an icon of the Trinity

I do not think there is any doubt that the most famous icon in the world is the Saint Andrei Rublev one of the Trinity. Actually the persons depicted have wings, and are the three angels who met with Abraham at the oak of Mamre. But there is no doubt that it is intended as an icon of the Trinity. As with all icons there is a richness of symbolism. Paul Evdokimov has written about this icon, “nowhere in the world is there anything like it from the point of view of theological synthesis, symbolic richness and artistic beauty.” But looking at it one could easily say it is also an icon of the Church. Here is the Church gathered around the table for the eucharistic supper. There is the chalice, through which we are brought into communion with the Holy Trinity and with one another and all the saints. Thus, in the mind of the famous Russian iconographer, the Persons of the Trinity and the Church are one.

In the first issue of the magazine *Souvozh*^{xiii}, Nicolas Berdyaev writes, “Orthodoxy considers itself to be the religion of the Holy Trinity. It is not an abstract monotheism that is reflected in its spiritual life. . . but rather a *concrete Trinitarianism*. The Trinity is given much less expression in western Christianity, which is more Christ and man centred. The difference can be noted already even in eastern and western patristic writings, for the former begin to speak of God by referring to the divine Trinity, while the latter start from the human soul. This is why the East has discovered, in the main, the mysteries of Trinitarian and Christological dogma, whereas the teaching of the West. . . has in the main been about grace and freedom and about the organisation of the Church”.

The whole atmosphere of the Orthodox Church is Trinitarian. The Orthodox Liturgy begins with the words “blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”, and ends with the priestly blessing, “the Holy Trinity keep all of you”. In between there is the Cherubic Hymn “let us who mystically represent the cherubim and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, lay aside all worldly cares, that we may receive the King of all invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts, alleluiah.” When the Deacon says “let us love one another, that with one accord we may confess”, the choir replies: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Trinity, one in essence and undivided”. No wonder Lossky writes, “The Church is an image of the Holy Trinity”.^{xiv}

It is in the richness of the Divine Communion of the Trinity that the unity and

communion of the Church finds its rightful home. The Trinity is communion, as the Church is the human expression of that communion, and the eucharist its fullest expression and experience on earth.

The two aspects

The Orthodox understanding of the Church is bound eternally to her understanding of the Trinity. The coming of Christ in the Incarnation, and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost are cardinal. In these comings the Church has from the beginning seen its true life and destiny. It is impossible for Orthodox to think or conceive of the Church, without at the same time seeing and experiencing the Trinity. The Trinitarian experience governs not only the life of the Church herself, but each individual baptised member. The pleroma resides in the whole and in each part.

Lossky sees the focus of the Christ-Church relationship in terms of persons. He sees the experience of unity in this relationship. On the other hand he sees the focus of the Holy Spirit - Church relationship in terms of individuals, and the emphasis on variety, on difference^{of} ministries, fruit and gifts, but all united for the good of the Church. In this he is reflecting the Pauline teaching in Ephesus and 1 Corinthians in particular.

The Orthodox Church has never described the Church as “the extension of the Incarnation”, for the Church is the fullness of the Son (see Ephesians 1:22-23). There is no record of such a description in the Church Fathers. But Lossky does refer to the Incarnation “being completed in the Church”, which is different. He goes on to say that in a certain sense “the Church is Christ Himself in His all-embracing plenitude.” He then goes on to quote the famous words of St Augustine “*non solum nos Christianos factos esse, sed Christum*”. For if He is the Head, we are the members: the whole man is He and we. St Augustine was fond of the expression *totus Christus*, for it occurs many times in his writings. For him in a magnificent statement, Christ and the Church are “One Man up to the end of the ages”.

Orthodox ecclesiology then confronts anew the distinction between nature and persons. But it also unites the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit. The Church is created at Pentecost. This creation is the antithesis of Babel, a city constructed by man without the involvement of God, and bringing, as this action always does, confusion and division. The unity of the Church is rooted in Christ, the differences are in the action of the Holy Spirit - differences which are nonetheless held together in unity by the same Spirit. In a powerful passage Lossky

writes^{xv}

Our nature is another's: Christ has secured it by his own precious blood; uncreated grace is our own - it has been conferred upon us by the Holy Spirit. This is the unfathomable mystery of the Church, the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit; one in Christ, multiple through the Spirit, *a single human nature* in the hypostasis of Christ, *many human hypostases* in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Yet, one Church because a single body: a single nature united with God in the person of Christ; for our personal union, the perfect union with God in *our* persons, will be fulfilled only in the age to come.

Thus Lossky explains the essence of the Church in these two aspects, which can be seen so fundamentally in that most ecclesiological of books, the Epistle to the Ephesians. Saint Paul brings these aspects together in 1:22-23, "And God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." The Church is "the fulfilment of the trinitarian economy. . . and the Christological aspect of the Church is thus revealed to us through the pneumatological. The Church is our nature recapitulated by Christ and contained within his hypostasis. It is a theandric (Greek *theandrikos*) organism, both divine and human."^{xvi} But we are not held in the grip of a divine determinism. Our will, personality and individualism remains intact. Grace does not destroy freedom, it informs it, challenges it, and embraces it - the work of *theosis* is initiated by God's grace, and sustained within the context of personal freedom. Deification is not a blind physical process. Thus the Church has a character, a true humanity. The Church is the pleroma of Christ, but each baptised individual also has that fulness, as we have said before.

St John Chrysostom puts it so well as he brings together all this, with the sacramental aspect as well

Do you wish to learn from another source as well as the strength of this blood? Look from where it first flowed and where it had its source! It flowed down from the cross, from the Master's side. St John says that, when Christ was dead but still on the cross, the soldier came and pierced His side with a lance, and straight away there came out blood and water. The one was a symbol of baptism, and the other of the mysteries. It was the soldier then who opened Christ's side and dug through the rampart of the holy temple, and I am the one who has found the treasure and gotten the wealth. . .

Blood and water flowed from his side. . . beloved, do not pass over this mystery without thought; it has yet another hidden meaning. I said that water and blood symbolised baptism and the Holy Eucharist. From these two sacraments the Church is born: from baptism, the cleansing water that gives rebirth and renewal through the Holy Spirit, and from the Holy Eucharist. Since the symbols of baptism and the eucharist flowed from his side, it was

from his side that Christ fashioned the Church, as he has fashioned Eve from the side of Adam. . . Do you understand, then, how Christ has united his bride to himself and what food he gives us all to eat? By one and the same food we are both brought into being and nourished.

The recovery of a true understanding of Catholicity

The first known use in Christian literature of the word “catholic” can be found in the *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* by Saint Ignatius of Antioch. “Wherever the bishop appears let the congregation be present; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the *catholic* Church.”

John Meyendorff points out the term “catholicity” is comparatively recent in origin.^{xvii} The patristic and credal tradition only uses the adjective *catholic*. He points out that “catholicity” introduces abstractions that should not be the concern of the Church. He goes on, “in the patristic period the Church was not itself an object of speculation or even of controversy (except in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries) *but it was the living context of all theology*. He ruefully adds, “as we all know this is no longer the case. In the ecumenical movement the nature and identity of the Church is understood differently by the various Christian groups.”

The word “catholic” is overdue for rescue from its present ambiguities. Its primary meaning according to the Oxford Dictionary is “universal” or “all-embracing” “broadminded” and “tolerant”. Most Christians if asked what the word “catholic” means, would say “universal” in a global sense. But as we shall see the Church only began to use the word “catholic” in that sense in the Donatist controversy in the 4th century. The other use of the word is a technical one - either the Roman Catholic Church, or the “high church” in Anglican and other Churches. It is interesting that the Russian language distinguishes between the two Churches with the change of only one letter. *Katolicheskaiia* is the word used for the Roman Catholic Church, and *kafolicheskaiia* for the Eastern Orthodox.

Georges Florovsky deals with this matter with some thoroughness in chapter 3 of Volume 1 of his collected works. He makes it clear that for the Orthodox the catholicity of the Church is neither a quantitative nor a geographical concept. He writes “the universality of the Church is the consequence of the manifestation, but not the cause or the foundation of its catholicity.” He goes on to assert that the Church was catholic even when it consisted of tiny islands in great seas of Judaism and paganism. One can ask the question, where was the Church when overwhelmingly it seemed to be embracing Arianism? Florovsky shows how

"catholic" means, first of all, the inner wholeness and integrity of the Church's life. "We are speaking here of *wholeness* not only of *communion* and in any case not of a simple empirical communion. Catholicity is not the same as Catholic, "it belongs" he writes, "not to the phenomenal and empirical, but to the noumenal (the word used by Kant to describe the antithesis of phenomenal) and ontological plane; it describes the very essence, not the external manifestations."^{xviii}

In other words the Christians who first used the word never meant the universal church, and certainly not tolerance and fair play. Such adjectives are out of place in describing the champions of orthodoxy in the 4th century as they grappled with Arius, Nestorius and others. It is true that Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (in the 18th of his *Baptismal Catechesis*) explained the word "catholic" in terms of "gathering" and "because it spreads all over the universe", but he adds, "because also in the Church the dogmas are taught fully without omission, *catholically*, and completely, and because again in the Church every kind of sin is cured and healed."^{xix} So catholicity is understood as an inner quality. Florovsky asserts that the Church is catholic because it is the only Body of Christ, it is union with Christ, oneness in the Holy Spirit. In the light of this one can see why the Vincentian Canon ("what has been believed everywhere, always and by all") would be critiqued by Florovsky^{xx}, and he does write about its inadequacies, although the Canon is richer and more complex than the famous passage just quoted.

The two natures

If, as we have seen, Christ and the Church, which is His Body, are one, so we should not be surprised to see that the Church has two natures as Christ has two. This is exactly what Lossky says in his book *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. He writes, "the Church, in its Christological aspect, appears as an organism having two natures, two operations and two wills."^{xxi} I was first fully aware of this important strand of Orthodox ecclesiology when I discussed this paper with Bishop Kallistos Ware in Cambridge a few months ago. He told me he thought this was probably the most relevant aspect in today's church and world situation.

Bishop Kallistos Ware brings this nuance out in his book *The Orthodox Church*.^{xxii} "The dogma of Chalcedon" he writes, "must be applied to the Church as well as to Christ. Just as Christ the God-Man has two natures, divine and human, so in the Church there is a synergy or co-operation between the divine and the human".

Obviously there is one major difference, Christ is sinless both as God and Man. The Church as the Body of Christ likewise is sinless; but in her human aspect she is not,

although, through the process of deification she is on the way to becoming perfect in the age to come. Bishop Kallistos affirms “human sin cannot affect the essential nature of the Church. . . the Church even on earth, is a thing of heaven, and cannot sin”.

But Lossky develops this theme in another and important way.^{xxiii} He sees a vital connection between Christological and ecclesiological heresies. In passing it is worth observing that the ordination of women to the priesthood is another example of what is basically an ecclesiological heresy, but which is also a Christological one. He declares, “in the history of Christian dogma all the Christological heresies come to life anew and reappear with reference to the Church”. He mentions, for example, a Nestorian ecclesiology, like the Protestant heresy of the “visible” and “invisible” church, dividing the Church into distinct beings. Then there is a monophysite ecclesiology which unites the two natures, and sees every detail of the Church as sacred, so that nothing can be changed or modified, because human freedom (*synergy*), according to Lossky “has no place”.

In my conversation with Bishop Kallistos he said he felt the Nestorian was more common within the western Church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, whereas the Orthodox Church is often in danger of the monophysite ecclesiology. One might add that the Gnosticism which gnaws away at the Churches of North America, and is all too common in the Charismatic Renewal, produces a gnostic ecclesiology, which emphasises spiritual experience and the spectacular, and undervalues the sacraments and the “ordinary”. The Orthodox Church has seen both the Nestorian and the monophysite ecclesiological heresies in the theology of Cyril Loukaris and the Old Believers in Russia.

Lossky sums up with the words that all that can be asserted or denied about Christ can equally well be applied to the Church, “inasmuch as it is a theandric organism, or more exactly, a created nature inseparably united to God in the hypostasis of the Son, a being which has - as He has - two natures, two wills and two operations which are at once inseparable and yet distinct. This Christological structure determines a permanent and necessary operation of the Holy Spirit in the Church. . .”

Mary - the first fruits of the glorified Church

It looks at first sight that until the consummation of the ages, until the final resurrection of the dead and the last Judgement, the Church will have no hypostasis of her own, no created hypostasis, no human person having attained to perfect union with God. But to say that is to fail, as Lossky points out, “to perceive the very heart

of the Church, one of her most sacred mysteries, her mystical centre, her perfection, already realized in a human person fully united to God, finding herself beyond the resurrection and the judgement.”^{xxiv} That person is Mary.

If Christ and the Body of Christ, the Church, are one, then the one who bore that Body in her womb has a unique and important place in the Church. In a glorious piece of writing Saint Gregory Palamas says this about Mary

Wishing to create an image of all beauty, and to manifest clearly to men and to angels the power of his art, God truly created Mary all-beautiful. In her He has brought together all the partial beauties which he distributed amongst other creatures, and has made her the ornament of all beings, visible and invisible; or, rather, He has made her a blending of all perfections, divine, angelic, and human; a sublime beauty adorning two worlds, lifting up from earth to heaven and even transcending that. *In Dormitionem* 468 AB

Of all the benefits of becoming Orthodox, I would place in the forefront my discovery of Mary, the Theotokos, the Mother of God. I cannot help believing that some Churches’ desires to ordain women to the priesthood is deeply influenced by the absence of Mary from the consciousness of those Churches. In my experience Mary passed in a very short time from zero rating to the pre-eminent place she now holds in my spiritual life.

The place that Mary holds in the Orthodox Church is different, and I think more wholesome than that of the Roman Catholic Church. There is great variety in the Roman Church in devotions to Mary, all the way from virtually the fourth person of the “Trinity” to almost complete neglect. In the Orthodox Church she is always there, next to her Son, pointing eternally to Him and not herself, and giving to sinful mortals hope of the ultimate perfecting of their lives. She is never forgotten, always and at all times in the consciousness of all true Orthodox believers, loved for who she is, as well as what she did in obedience to the call of God. One cannot in any serious examination of the Church leave out the one who bore the Body of Christ in her womb and gave birth and suck to the Son of God. As Lossky has put it, “in the two perfect persons - the divine person of Christ and the human person of the Mother of God - is contained the mystery of the Church”.^{xxv}

One of Britain’s best known composers of our day is John Tavener, one of whose works was included in the funeral of the late Princess Diana.^{xxvi} The story of his life and his conversion to Orthodoxy is well told by Geoffrey Haydon, who includes this extract from one of the composer’s letters

This morning I went to the shrine of Saint Nektarios. . . I began to look at Orthodox Churches - how rounded they are, how gentle, how unlike those western mathematical masculine edifices. And I thought, yes, the Church is FEMININE - the Church is the Mother of God. Then I thought - this is why the Western Church has gone all wrong with its insistence on masculine precepts, and why the Roman Catholic Church misinterprets the Mother of God, makes her sentimental and nurse-like. She is *eternal wisdom*, which is also feminine: *Sophia* in Greek. . . I rarely think like this in England!

John Tavener by Geoffrey Haydon^{xxvii}

John Tavener's last throwaway remark is interesting and revealing - "I rarely think like this in England!" John Tavener is not alone in this when it comes to the Church. People "rarely think about the Church" in our cool Britannia. Some see her as an organizational structure, to be endlessly adjusted to the times. Others as the stage on which God performs his great dramas. Others still as a religious think tank or the Socialist party not at prayer. And so one could go on.

How about the Orthodox? The Orthodox Church has always seen herself as the true Church. She has always rejected the branch theory. She does not see herself as one branch of a huge tree. Bishop Kallistos Ware writes^{xxviii}

Orthodoxy, believing that the Church on earth has remained and must remain visibly one, naturally also believes itself to be that one visible Church. This is a bold claim, and to many it will seem an arrogant one; but this is to misunderstand the spirit in which it is made. Orthodox believe that they are the true Church, not on account of any personal merit, but by the grace of God. . . and while claiming no credit for themselves, Orthodox are in all humility convinced that they have received a precious and unique gift from God; and if they pretended to others that they did not possess this gift, they would be guilty of an act of betrayal in the sight of heaven.

Saint John Chrysostom writes about this true Church, in his day undivided^{xxix}

Nothing is more abiding than the Church: she is your salvation; she is your refuge. She is more lofty than the heavens; she is more far-reaching than the earth. She never grows old; she always stays in bloom. And so Scripture indicates her permanence and stability by calling her a virgin; her magnificence by calling her a queen; her closeness to God by calling her a daughter; her barrenness turned to fecundity by calling her "the mother of seven". . . since one name could not hope to describe the Omnipotent, and many names give us some small insight into His nature, so the Church goes by many names.

The Church is many things: at one a bride, at another a daughter, now a virgin, now a handmaid, now a queen; at one time barren, at another a garden; at one time fertile, at another a lily, at another a fountain. . . A mountain is not a virgin, a virgin is not a bride, a queen is not a servant; yet the Church is all these things. Why? Because they are spiritual,

not physical realities, and the spiritual is a vast ocean.

It is a glorious experience to be afloat on this vast ocean, and to embrace spiritual realities. And we are not to cast the pearl of the Church before the swine of this world, who, to quote the words of C.S. Lewis, “claim to see fernseed, but can’t see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight”. What Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:14 is as true as ever, “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned”.

May the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth about the Church, which is the Body of Christ, the Son of God.

Notes

C:\WP60\WRITING\YORK-conf.wpd

© Michael Harper. Not to be copied, printed or published in any form without the written permission of the author.

Further copies can be obtained from the author

Father Michael Harper
ICCOWE
PO Box 2000
Haywards Heath
West Sussex RH16 3YB

Please send £1.50 (\$2) per copy plus postage

ⁱ. Hodder and Stoughton, 1978

ⁱⁱ. Page 13

ⁱⁱⁱ. Page 96

-
- iv. OUP, 1948 p 108
- v. June 1998
- vi. On the contrary it has always seemed to me that the power base has always been with the parish, and if anything the present trend is towards the diocese.
- vii. Page 200
- viii. Page 15
- ix. *Sourozh*, No 20, May 1985
- x. *Bible, Church, Tradition: an Eastern Orthodox View*
Büchervertriebsanstalt 1987 p 57
- xi. Ibid p 58
- xii. Ibid page 16
- xiii. August 1980
- xiv. Ibid p 176
- xv. Ibid p 183
- xvi. Ibid p 184
- xvii. *Living Tradition* Saint Vladimir Seminary 1978 p 81
- xviii. Ibid p 40
- xix. Ibid p 41
- xx. Ibid p 51
- xxi. James Clarke & Co 1957 p 186
- xxii. Penguin Books 1963, this edition 1993 p 244
- xxiii. Ibid p 186f
- xxiv. Ibid p 193f
- xxv. Ibid p 195
- xxvi. Part of the Orthodox Funeral Service
- xxvii. Victor Gollancz, 1995 p 202

xxviii. Ibid p 246

xxix. PG 52, 402