

Orthodox contributions to ecumenical ecclesiology

by

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Eastern Orthodox churches generally do not begin theological reflection with the doctrine of the church. Georges Florovsky's comment below is representative:

On the Orthodox side, it has been claimed more than once that no strict or formal "definition" of the Church is possible and that no such definition is needed. Indeed, the Fathers of the ancient church did not care for formulas simply because they had an existential knowledge of the Church, an intuition or vision of her mysterious reality. One does not define what is self-evident.¹

However, such a sentiment does not preclude serious theological reflection on the nature of the church. Nicolas Zernov points out that prior to the Reformation the ecclesiological issue was rarely raised, but when raised was generally treated with a reflection upon the credal affirmation of the marks of the church; "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." He contends that both western and eastern ecclesiological formulas developed as a result of the Reformation and that the centuries of apologetics that followed share the same pattern: an emphasis on the marks "which distinguish the authentic Church from heretical and schismatic congregations."² Zernov identifies Alexei Khomiakov as one of the first to challenge this model. In his short book, *The church is one*, Khomiakov defines the church:

not as a multitude of persons in their separate individuality, but as a unity of the grace of God living in a multitude of rational creatures submitting themselves willingly to grace.³

The ecumenical movement is founded on the conviction that the unity of the church is both real and the will of God. In recent years, ecumenists have turned their reflections to ecclesiology. At one time, the issue had been set aside as too contentious. At the 1950 Toronto meeting of the World Council of Churches Central Committee, the Council foreswore any particular ecclesiology or concept of church unity.⁴ Consequently, the subsequent agenda of the Faith and Order Commission addressed the subjects of baptism, eucharist and ministry without a common agreement on

¹ Georges Florovsky, *Collected works of Georges Florovsky*, (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1989), 14: 29.

² Nicolas Zernov, *The reintegration of the church: a study in intercommunion*. (London: SCM Press, 1952), 18.

³ Alexei Khomiakov, "The church is one", in W.J. Birkbeck, ed., *Russia and the English church during the last fifty years*. Vol. 1. (London: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1895), 193.

⁴ The "Toronto Statement" includes five disclaimers under the heading: "What the WCC is Not." The third and fifth of these are as follows: (3) "the WCC cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the Church. It does not prejudice the ecclesiological problem," and (5) "membership of the WCC does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of church unity." G.K.A. Bell, ed., *Documents on Christian Unity, 4th series, 1948-57*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

ecclesiology to underpin it. The limited reception of the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document (BEM)⁵ is partly attributed to differing views on the ecumenical task. Nevertheless, there is an implicit ecclesiological vision in the Lima document which made possible the agreement and which attracted considerable criticism in the official responses from some churches. Following the publication of BEM in 1982, the Faith and Order Commission has finally turned its attention to ecclesiology.

As the churches address this issue, the Eastern Orthodox contribution is striking. Perhaps in no other ecumenical context has the Orthodox perspective been so clearly seen. In 1991 at the WCC's Assembly in Canberra, Australia, the council initiated a study process towards an articulation of ecumenical ecclesiology.⁶ As the Canberra Assembly noted, there is a growing need to study the ecclesiological assumptions that the churches bring to the dialogues in which they participate. Can such a study lead to the development of an ecumenical ecclesiology, that is, an ecclesiology that points the way towards unity, and that the churches recognise as being consonant with their own faith experience? The primary theme for this study is *koinonia*, or communion. The study of the "church as communion" has found its way into all of the major bilateral dialogues, and has led to a surprising level of convergence, consensus and common agreement.⁷ The concept of church as communion, though not unknown in western theology, is found with particular clarity in Orthodox theology and ecclesiastical discipline. It is perhaps too easy to give sole credit to Orthodox participants for contributing this theme to current ecumenical discourse. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the Orthodox articulation of *koinonia* by paying particular attention to its ecumenical implications.

⁵ World Council of Churches. Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Commonly referred to as the Lima document.

⁶ "Report of Section III: 'Spirit of Unity - Reconcile Your People'" in *Signs of the Spirit*. Ed. Michael Kinnamon. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 97.

⁷ Of particular interest are the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission's *Church as Communion* (1992), *Life in Christ* (1994) and *The Gift of Authority* (1999). Each reflects a consensus among Roman Catholics on the nature of the church as communion and teases out the implications of this consensus in particular areas of theology and church practice. The Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity has also taken up the theme in its *Church and Justification* (1993) where it explores the implications for ecclesiology of their subsequent *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1999). The Methodist-Roman Catholic International Dialogue, the Anglican-Orthodox International Commission and the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church have all taken up the theme to their benefit. A more recent dialogue to consider the theme of "church as communion/*koinonia*" is the World Evangelical Alliance-Roman Catholic Church Conversations. This group is currently studying the theme but has not yet issued any agreed statements.

I. Extra ecclesiam nulla salus!

Outside of the church, there is no salvation. This famous dictum⁸ has presented a challenge to Christians since its formulation in the third century. What does it mean to say that there is no salvation outside of the church? Are we speaking of the visible boundaries of the church? If one is not a baptised, communicating member of the church can one be saved? Which church is it that we must belong to?

Of course, there is only one church. Scripture witnesses and the creeds attest that there is “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” A common interpretation of the “extra ecclesiam” dictum is that there is an invisible church that incorporates all people of good will in every time and place. These people are considered the authentic church that will be saved.

This contrast between the visible and invisible churches presents a challenge to all who reflect upon the nature of the church, and their participation within it. If one opts for the invisible church the bonds of unity are weakened or broken and authority becomes individualised. As a result, diversity becomes the norm and the transmission of doctrine and faith to subsequent generations becomes tenuous at best. Alternatively, if one opts for an ecclesiology based solely on the visible or canonical boundaries of the church, is one truly called to holiness, or merely to conformity? Is it possible that a church constituted solely by canon law and hierarchical structures can be life-giving, sanctifying and a means of redemption? Moreover, what about all those who have been born and who have lived outside of the knowledge of Christ or the church? Certainly, this classic dilemma is one that confronts us more directly in our pluralistic society.

Among the fathers of the church, St. Cyprian is identified with the rigorist approach, that of visible and canonical boundaries. In partial contrast, we find St. Augustine. Where Cyprian could suggest that the “canonical and charismatic limits of the church completely and invariably coincide,” Augustine was concerned more with the eschatological.⁹ For Augustine, the church is found where the

⁸ The dictum is commonly cited as above. However it is first formulated circa 256 AD in Cyprian's *Epistle* 73.21; PL 3, col. 1123B: “*salus extra ecclesia non est*”.

⁹ Georges Florovsky, “The doctrine of the church and the ecumenical problem,” *Ecumenical review* 2 (1950): 154-156.

sacraments are administered. Even where human sin and lack of faith intercede, the sacraments are celebrated and have redemptive character. Thus, outside of the canonical limits of the church, even in communities of schismatics, the sacraments have an inward impulse towards full ecclesial unity.

Georges Florovsky offers a contemporary Orthodox critique of the notion of a separation between the visible and invisible church.

The two lives [of the church] are united and interrelated in the identity of the subject: unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably. There is but one Church, “visible” and “invisible” at once, humiliated and glorious at once. The human condition is not abrogated by divine grace but only redeemed and transfigured.¹⁰

Unlike the fourth century when Augustine wrote to challenge the Donatists, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are characterised by an ecumenical openness which simultaneously challenges the Cyprian / Augustine dichotomy, and poses the question “is there salvation outside of the church?” in an ever more pressing manner. Modern Christians address this question in a variety of ways. Commonly, the conviction is expressed that baptism draws all churches regardless of their denominational stripe into an amorphous unity in which all distinctions are irrelevant and all barriers obsolete. An alternate view is that baptism is a minimal bond that compels us to take seriously the task of ecumenical rapprochement, but it is not sufficient for full unity. Underlying this position is an ecclesiological perspective which attempts to hold the Cyprianite and Augustinian positions in some kind of balance. The unity of the church is understood as constituted both by the sacramental bonds of baptism and eucharist and by the doctrine and discipline professed by its members. While sacraments impel us, and even compel us, towards some form of unity, at the same time they serve as a profession of the faith of the community in which they are celebrated.

II. Ecclesiology in the New Testament

Ecclesiology is, at least partly, a reflection upon biblical teachings about the early community of Christ’s disciples and their own followers. While ecclesiology should also be a reflection on our own experience of community, it cannot be divorced from its biblical grounding. A variety of

¹⁰ Florovsky, *Collected works*, 14: 31.

ecclesiological themes can be found in Scripture. These different themes are not exclusive of each other, as one might think, but rather are interwoven throughout the New Testament, and draw heavily upon the Old Testament as well. Many churches turning to Scripture to articulate their self-definition as church are disappointed to discover the great variety of images of the church. The church is described as the body of Christ, the temple, the new covenant, Sons of Abraham, the people and twelve tribes of Israel, the servant people and slaves of God or Christ, and those sanctified in Christ Jesus.

The “body of Christ” theme identifies the community of believers as the body of the risen Christ (Rom. 14:7-9). Christ calls all those who believe into a community which is his body, and wherein he resides. This community is the church. There are many members but there is but one body (Rom. 12:4-5, I Cor. 10:17, I Cor. 12:12, Eph. 4:4). All who are members of the body are mutually dependent, as they are part of each other (Rom. 12:5). Those who believe and are made one in his body by baptism (Rom. 6:1-5, I Cor. 12:13) are brought freedom from law, sin and death (Rom. 6-8, Eph. 2:1-10, Col. 2:16-23). The “body of Christ” theme is found primarily in Paul’s letters, but may also be found in other texts as well. The letter to the Hebrews speaks “of the body as the realm of Christian solidarity in suffering” (Heb. 13:3). John speaks of the body of Jesus “as the temple, which is to be destroyed and built again (Jn. 2:19-21).”¹¹

The “people of God” theme identifies Christ’s disciples with the people of Israel. Thus the contention that the people who follow Christ have been born again to a new life under a new covenant (Acts 28:20). They are the new people of the new covenant (Heb. 8:8-10), the Sons of Abraham (Mt. 3:9, Jn. 8:9, Rom. 4:1-6, Gal. 3:7-29, Heb. 11), the new people of Israel (Mt. 12:29) and the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19:28, Lk. 22:30, Jas. 1:1, Rev. 7:4, 21:12).¹²

The “servant-people” theme explores the duties that derive in response to faith. The believers are bound to Christ and to one another in the same manner as Christ bound himself to all. Moreover, those who are bound to him are bound to each other (II Cor. 4:5, Gal. 5:13). It was not uncommon

¹¹ *The interpreter’s dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Church, idea of,” 615.

¹² *Ibid.*

for New Testament authors to refer to “themselves as slaves of God (Tit. 1:1) and of Christ (Rom. 1:1, Phil. 1:1, Jas. 1:1, II Pet. 1:1, Jude 1:1, Rev. 1:1).”¹³

The presence of this thematic diversity is considered by some as evidence of ecclesiological diversity in the apostolic church. They see an absence of a single normative ecclesiology, which permits a diversity of contemporary ecclesiologies. The unity of the church is thus consigned to the same mythical categories as the creation myths that teach the unity of all humanity, and the Jubilee visions of a just society that lives in peace with its neighbours. At the same time, it unintentionally removes the obligation for overcoming the divisions that have arisen in the church through history. Orthodox churches reject the view that the Scriptural diversity represents an absence of ecclesiological norms. The Scriptural diversity is understood as complementary and holistic, rather than contradictory and fragmentary.

III. Trinitarian ecclesiology

Both the polemical and the more recent irenic dialogues between Orthodox and Catholic churches have highlighted a major distinction in our conception of the Trinity. The stereotypical approach of the western churches is to affirm the perfect oneness of God (monotheism), and then to proceed to explain the persons of the Trinity in light of the principle of unity (unicity). This contrasts with the eastern approach, which affirms the divine equality of the three persons before proceeding to affirm the unity expressed in their mutual relations (*koinonia*). John Zizioulas cautions that ecclesiology is not a sociological study. He alludes to a frequent eastern criticism of western theology:

If we believe in a God who is primarily an individual, who first *is* and then *relates*, we are not far from a sociological understanding of *koinonia*; the church in this case is not in its *being* communion, but only secondarily, i.e. for the sake of its *bene esse*.¹⁴

Perhaps this distinction would not seem terribly significant were it not for its implications for further theological reflections. Both Orthodox and Catholics stress the church as the image of the Trinity, and thus the diverging understandings of the Trinity result in diverging ecclesiologies.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John D. Zizioulas, “The church as communion: A presentation on the world conference theme” in *On the way to fuller koinonia: Official report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 104.

Following the western approach to the Trinity, Catholics affirm the essential unity of the church and then proceed to explain the particularity of the church in place and time. The horizon of linguistic and cultural diversity — not to mention theological diversity — is limited by the *a priori* conception of the church as one. Perfect unity requires uniformity, and all else falls before its hegemony.

The alternate position from the eastern churches has never been as starkly articulated as it has in the Latin west. However, when one begins with the particularity of the church and proceeds to affirm the fundamental unity therein, it is not possible to posit an ontologically prior unity. Instead one must search for another means by which the “one and the many” may be affirmed. A trinitarian understanding that begins with the unity of God and then moves to the persons, i.e. the western tendency, risks treating the persons as mere expressions of the Godhead, a position dangerously close to modalism. Similarly, as Zizioulas cautioned, an ecclesiology that begins with the unity of the church and then moves to the diversity of local expression treats the bonds of communion as inessential in the nature of the church.

The doctrine of the Trinity acquires in this case a decisive significance: God *is* Trinitarian; he is a relational being by definition; a non-Trinitarian God is not *koinonia* in his very being. Ecclesiology must be based on Trinitarian theology if it is to be an ecclesiology of communion.¹⁵

The English term “communion” comes from the Latin: “*communio*,” which in turn comes from the Greek: “*koinonia*.” Used in the New Testament in reference to the early Christian community (Acts 2:42; I Cor. 1:9, 10:16; II Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1; I Jn. 1:3, 1:6-7), *koinonia* has subsequently been used to describe the relationship of persons within the Trinity. The term *koinonia* is used in the New Testament to refer to the fellowship or community of the people of God. Interestingly, although “fellowship” is sometimes used today as a synonym for “church,” in the New Testament “*koinonia*” is never explicitly used as a synonym for “*ecclesia*.”

In the ecclesiology of communion, the accent is upon the relational aspects of Christian community rather than the hierarchical and juridical accents found in other ecclesiologies such as those drawing upon the “body of Christ” theme. An ecclesiology that begins with the relational

¹⁵ Ibid.

character of the Trinity will explore the relational nature of Christian unity before it asks the question “what is the church?” In this way, it will avoid institutionalism.

The Church is a visible historic community or institution and at the same time she is also the body of Christ. She is at once a company of frail men, always in travail (in labore), and a glorious communion (koinonia) with the Lord. This crucial mystery can be adequately conceived only in the categories of the Chalcedonian dogma. We are facing here the same paradox, if only analogically.¹⁶

The vision of the ecumenical movement is Jesus’ high priestly prayer: “that they all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (Jn. 17:21) The understanding of Christian unity expressed in this text is essentially trinitarian and kerygmatic. It expresses a trinitarian understanding of Christian unity in the identity between Christian unity and the “oneness” of the three persons of the Trinity. It is kerygmatic in the sense that the unity of the church is a witness to the world of the God who has made us one “so that the world may believe.” The unity of the church expressed in the notion of koinonia is thus not merely a human construct, but a divine gift.

Koinonia derives not from sociological experience, nor from ethics, but from *faith*. We are not called to koinonia because it is “good” for us and for the church, but because we believe in a God who is in his very being koinonia.¹⁷

Though the WCC did not actively engage in a study process on ecclesiology until after the Lima document was completed, the trinitarian perspective is found as early as the 1954 Evanston Assembly:

Thus the fellowship (koinonia) that the members of the church have is not simply human fellowship; it is fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and fellowship with the saints in the church triumphant.¹⁸

Similar trinitarian ecclesiology can be detected in the New Delhi Assembly’s 1961 decision¹⁹ to revise the *Basis of the WCC* to include a more explicit trinitarian confession, and the Nairobi Assembly’s 1968 description of “conciliar fellowship” in terms of the Triune God. These statements came directly as a result of Orthodox interventions. Particularly, the New Delhi revision to the *WCC Basis* was a

¹⁶ Florovsky, *Collected works*, 14: 30.

¹⁷ Zizioulas, “The church as communion,” 104.

¹⁸ *Evanston Report* B.8, as quoted by Jean Tillard in *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement*, s.v. “koinonia,” 568.

¹⁹ *The New Delhi Report*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1962), 152.

pre-condition required by the original Orthodox member churches in order to allow the remaining Orthodox churches to join the WCC at New Delhi.

IV. Theology of Image

As we have said, for eastern Christians, the church is understood to be an image of the Trinity.

However, Zizioulas cautions:

The church is not a sort of Platonic “image” of the Trinity; she is communion in the sense of being the people of God, Israel, and the “body of Christ”, i.e. in the sense of serving and realizing in herself God’s purpose in history for the sake of the entire creation.²⁰

In addition to understanding the church as an image of the Trinity, both eastern and western churches affirm the creation of humanity “in the image and likeness of God.” Because of differing articulations of God’s image and likeness, fundamentally different theological anthropologies arise. Thus, it is important to investigate closer the meaning of the term “image.” I have used the term in the sense that it is found in the first chapter of Genesis “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen. 1:26, 27). However, the assertion that Christian community is formed in the image of the Triune God requires that we stretch the term beyond its Genesis usage. Vladimir Lossky explores the theology of the image and shows the depths and the limitations of the concept.

For Lossky, the Genesis usage of the term “image” must make room for Hellenic philosophical usage. As Lossky points out, the theology of the image is not elaborated upon in the Old Testament. Apart from the initial reference in the first chapter of Genesis, no further recourse to the theme occurs in Scripture until the Deuterocanonical texts, particularly the “Wisdom of Solomon.” The Hebraic Genesis text differs from the Septuagint in the positive force given by the Greek to the expression “in our image.” Lossky acknowledges that the Hellenic influences strengthened the text and gave the concept a greater prominence in the later texts originating in the Hellenic period. He suggests that this was “the answer to an internal need of Revelation itself, which thus received in the

²⁰ Zizioulas, “The church as communion,” 106.

last stage of the Old Covenant an increase of light which was to lend new coloring to the sacred books of the Jews.”²¹ According to Lossky:

In its Trinitarian use, the term “image” denoted one divine Person who shows in Himself the nature or the natural attributes while referring them to another Hypostasis: the Holy Spirit to the Son, the Son to the Father.²²

The distinction between the nature of God, which is shared in each divine person, and the unique personhood of each Hypostasis, is precisely the point that must be kept in mind here. An image is related to its archetype as the manifestation of the archetype.²³ In their trinitarian usage, nature and essence are distinct from person and hypostasis. Person or hypostasis refers to a unique attribute of each of the three divine Persons. Nature or essence is the common attribute, for which the Greek word “homoousios” is used, which can be translated as “consubstantial” or “one in being.” The image shares an identity of nature with its archetype; in other words, it is consubstantial with its archetype. Thus, the Son is the image of the Father. But it is not the personhood of the archetype that is manifest in the image, but rather its nature. The Son is “complete, in everything like the Father, excepting the characteristics of unbegottenness and Fatherhood,”²⁴ these are the characteristics of the unique person of the Father. The Son makes known the Father, for we know the Father in the Son. The same is true when we speak of the Holy Spirit. For “‘no man can say, Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit.’ So it is in the Holy Spirit that we know Christ as Son of God and God, and it is by the Son that we see the Father.”²⁵

Having summarised Lossky’s usage of these terms, we are faced with a particular difficulty by the Genesis usage of the term “image.” Clearly, the Genesis text does not intend to suggest that humanity shares in the divinity of the Creator. Yet, divinity belongs to the nature of the Creator. This is where Lossky finds the genius of Christian anthropology. For Lossky, in God’s act of creation the human

²¹ Vladimir Lossky, *In the image and likeness of God*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 128.

²² *Ibid.*, 138.

²³ Lossky points out that “archetype” is language common to Origen, but already archaic to Gregory of Nyssa. Obviously its similarity to Jungian terminology should be disregarded.

²⁴ St. John Damascene, *De imaginibus* 3.18; PG 94, col. 1340AB as quoted by Lossky, 135.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

person receives more than merely the generic relationship of human nature in common with all other humans. In addition, the human person receives individual personhood.

Personhood belongs to every human being by virtue of a singular and unique relation to God who created him “in His image.”²⁶

This is not a relationship of participation as is true of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Rather it is by way of analogy. “Like the personal God, in whose image he is created, man is not only ‘nature’.”²⁷ The human person, unlike any other creature, shares analogously in the personhood of God.

Lossky’s anthropology has certain limitations. One of them is found in his conception of the individual character of human personhood. If each person receives their personhood “by virtue of a singular and unique relation to God” then the value and dignity of each person is certainly affirmed. There is strength in Lossky’s anthropology that we want to preserve. On the other hand, the very uniqueness that gives each person their dignity also makes them solitary. If we conceive of each person as having a unique relation to God from which derives their personhood, then the ties to other humans are solely at the level of human nature. There is a risk of conceiving of human personhood as a solitary monad. There is a risk of breaking the ties that bind each person to their neighbour. There is a risk of destroying the notion of the unity of the church of Christ. Trinitarian theology and the concept of *koinonia* are of course the solution to this limitation in Lossky. We are not created in the image of God, the Father, but rather in the image of the Trinitarian God, a God who is a relational being. But, before we look further at *koinonia*, the theological anthropology of John Zizioulas is worth exploring.

In his book, *Being as communion*, Zizioulas distinguishes between the biological and the ecclesial hypostasis of the human. The biological hypostasis, to paraphrase Zizioulas, is the conjunction of the biological nature of the human - as a body which is born, which lives, and will someday die - and the recognition of being uniquely an individual. The result of this hypostasis is a radical sense of freedom. As Zizioulas explains:

²⁶ Lossky, 137.

²⁷ Ibid.

[The human] body is the tragic instrument which leads to communion with others, stretching out a hand, creating language, speech, conversation, art, kissing. But at the same time it is the “mask” of hypocrisy, the fortress of individualism, the vehicle of the final separation, death.²⁸

The human body allows us to exist as solitary individuals. The same hand that can be offered in friendship can be used to strike another. Language, speech and conversation that allow us to bridge the isolation of individualism can be used to lie, cheat and slander one another. Art that can express the greatest of human aspirations can be used to propagate hate, despair and depravity. Kissing, normally a sign of love and intimacy between parent and child or husband and wife has the potential of losing its intimacy and becoming a matter of routine and obligation. Even worse, sexual expression between partners can degenerate into abuse and oppression. Far from forging communion with one another, the biological hypostasis is – for Zizioulas – the vehicle by which communion is broken.

The ecclesial hypostasis is much more complex. It is “constituted by the new birth of man by baptism”:

Consequently, if, in order to avoid the consequences of the tragic aspect of man which we have discussed, the person as absolute ontological freedom needs a hypostatic constitution without ontological necessity, his hypostasis must inevitably be rooted, or constituted, in an ontological reality which does not suffer from createdness.²⁹

This ontological reality is given to the person by baptism. It is a new birth in Christ, which because of Christ’s nature is freed from the individualism of human nature.

Christology ... is the proclamation to man that his [Christ’s] nature can be “assumed” and hypostasized in a manner free from the ontological necessity of his biological hypostasis, which, as we have seen, leads to the tragedy of individualism and death.³⁰

Both Lossky and Zizioulas recognise a problem in treating humanity as purely natural creatures. For Lossky, the affirmation that humans are created “in the image of God” requires a special case where creation imparts personhood in addition to human nature. For Zizioulas, the problem is the fundamental gulf between created nature and the creator. To bridge the gulf, Zizioulas asserts, God has given us the sacraments, particularly baptism and the eucharist.

²⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as communion: studies in personhood and the church*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1985), 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

The biological hypostasis, as a result of the fall, leads to a radical sense of individuality and of freedom. This is contrary to the action of the ecclesial hypostasis. The ecclesial hypostasis serves to translate disunity to unity. The ecclesial hypostasis is, as Zizioulas explains, the divine gift of the Incarnation. Christ takes upon himself the biological necessities of birth and death, of simple survival, and in death leads the people of God into the divine unity that is God. Christ is thus the first along a path that he leads between the radical individuality of the biological hypostasis and the divine unity of the Godhead.

I have called this hypostasis which baptism gives to man “ecclesial” because, in fact, if one should ask, “How do we see this new biological hypostasis of man realised in history?” the reply would be, “In the Church.”³¹

This ecclesial hypostasis, according to Zizioulas, is only made possible in the church. It is in the church that the eucharist is celebrated. The eucharist is the manifestation of the Incarnation of Christ, it is the Body of Christ and it brings the community itself into the Body of Christ. It celebrates the unity of the community, the church; and it is a foretaste of the Kingdom to come, the divine unity, salvation.

V. Koinonia and the Eucharist

In the first letter of John, the word koinonia is used “to signify in one word the simultaneous union of Christians with the Father and the Son and among themselves (1 Jn 1:3, 6-7).”³² The ecclesiology of communion – koinonia ecclesiology – describes the nature of the Christian community in terms of the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The early Christian community is described in Acts 2:42-47 as a community that devoted itself to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship (koinonia). It expresses this fellowship in its service to the poor, and by distributing their possessions to the community. Although he was not Eastern Orthodox, Jean Tillard expresses in a most eloquent way the significance of koinonia in the life of the Christian community.

With the restored unity of language as its sign [Acts 2: 6-11], the church is born by the fire of the Spirit, not simply as a society but as a “communion.” At once palpable and deeply hidden, this

³¹ Ibid.

³² Tillard, 570.

communion seeks willing hearts prepared to take such practical steps as the sharing of possessions, even to the point of privation. In this context *koinonia* (2:42) discloses its real meaning, about which exegetes continue to debate. However, one thing is certain: *koinonia* means more than table fellowship; nor is it simply interior harmony. Rather it engages people in a communal sharing, the sign of spiritual unanimity expressed within the fabric of daily social life.³³

Tillard's words show the depth to which *koinonia* influences the Christian community and the individual. His assertion that *koinonia* is "more than table fellowship" recognises that sacramental sharing is the external expression of a deeper communion between the churches. Sacramental sharing has been recognised throughout the history of the church as a sign of the bonds of communion between the churches. Indeed, the term "communion" has come to have a technical significance far greater than sharing in the sacraments. It refers to a formalisation of the relationship between churches such that the members can receive the sacraments freely in the partner churches. Historically in the east this has been symbolised by the inclusion of the name of the relevant patriarch within the "diptychs." Similarly in the Latin west, the inclusion of the pope's name within the eucharistic prayer symbolises the bonds of communion between the particular bishop and diocese, the bishop and church of Rome, and all other bishops and churches in communion with the bishop of Rome. The significance of this symbolic act is so great that a recent dispute between the Russian patriarch and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople led to the removal of the Ecumenical Patriarch from the eucharistic prayers in Moscow for a brief period.³⁴

The limited extent to which *koinonia* can truly be represented by eucharistic sharing is made clear when we reflect on the long-standing policies of "open communion" in many Protestant churches. In these churches, rather than seeing eucharistic sharing as a sign of *koinonia* that is already shared, it is understood as a sign of hope. The unity that we hope for can be experienced nowhere else except at the table of the Lord. As we shall see below, there is a sense in which the Orthodox view of the eucharist also represents an eschatological hope.

³³ Ibid., 571-572. The significance of Jean Tillard's work for both Catholic and Orthodox ecumenism has yet to be assessed. It is clear that a close friendship and trust of Tillard is shown by many Orthodox writers, particularly Zizioulas, his colleague at the World Council of Churches.

³⁴ Alexander F.C. Webster, "Split decision: The Orthodox clash over Estonia," *The Christian Century* 113, no. 19 (1996): 614-623.

One cannot read far into Orthodox theology before tripping over the deep reverence expressed for the eucharist and the intimate connection between eucharistic sharing and the bonds of ecclesial communion. The affinity between the church and the eucharist are immediately apparent when one considers that they are both described as the “body of Christ.” However, the connection is more than merely symbolic. A widely reported quote of Patriarch Athenagoras holds that “the Church is not the kingdom of God; it is the sacrament of the kingdom.”³⁵ By this, we should understand that the church is not the end in itself, not the purpose for its own existence. Rather the church serves to point the way and to provide support in the journey to God’s kingdom. The eucharist as well serves to strengthen the faithful pilgrim on the journey to God’s kingdom. If we leave it at this level however, we run the risk of suggesting that it is merely a common function that leads to the intimate connection between the church and the eucharist. We must delve deeper.

Both the church and the eucharist are reflections of the Incarnation and thus may truly be described as sacraments. More than merely signs and symbols of the presence of God in our world, the church and each of the sacraments are means by which God uses the material of creation to forge a bond between the divine and the human. Transcending the historical particularity of the Incarnation, the church – and indeed each sacrament – is a means of entering the mystery of God’s self-offering in divine and human form. The “historical particularity” of Jesus’ Incarnation cannot be denied, but it should not be understood that the Incarnation is thus historically relative. It is precisely because the divine takes on human flesh in the Incarnation that the death and resurrection of Jesus acquire their salvific meaning. It is in the resurrection of his Son that God offers his reconciliation to all creation. In the sacraments, we participate in the trinitarian mystery through the life of the Incarnate Son by the working of the Holy Spirit.

The eucharist is not the only expression of the incarnational character of the sacramental mysteries. It is not difficult to recognise the use of material elements – bread and wine – in this sacrament. Similarly, every sacramental action of the church, indeed the very church itself, involves

³⁵ Gennadios Limouris, “Being as koinonia in faith: challenges, visions and hopes for the unity of the church today,” *Ecumenical review* 45 (1993), 89.

the use of created elements to celebrate the divine mysteries, and to form the community into the body of Christ. Bishop Kallistos Ware can thus say that:

The Church is here to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood. ... The Church creates the Eucharist, and the Eucharist creates the Church.³⁶

The notion that the eucharist creates the church, or that it is related to the genesis of unity, is not immediately obvious. Ware thus argues for this notion by reference to I Corinthians: "The bread that we break, is it not a communion in the Body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."³⁷ Thus, he says:

Between communion in the one Eucharistic loaf and membership in the one ecclesial Body, the Apostle [Paul] asserts not simply an analogy but a causal connection.³⁸

Ware further cites the *Didache's* Fraction Rite:

As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains, and was then brought together and became one, so may Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy Kingdom.³⁹

Ware acknowledges that this *Didache* text is normally considered an agape prayer, however he believes a "directly eucharistic interpretation" is more appropriate.

Paul McPartlan credits the famous Jesuit, Henri de Lubac, with the double-principle quoted by Ware: "the church creates the Eucharist, and the Eucharist creates the church." In his study of de Lubac and Zizioulas,⁴⁰ McPartlan reports Père Bernard Sesboué's astonishment at seeing this principle quoted as patristic. McPartlan attributes the first appearance to de Lubac's *Méditation sur l'Eglise* in 1953, although it clearly derives from the medieval principle: "*sacramenta faciunt ecclesiam*."⁴¹ The apparent western source for this aphorism is not too surprising to Zizioulas. He acknowledges the extent to which the twentieth century Orthodox theological renaissance is attributable to a western

³⁶ Kallistos Ware, "The church of God: our shared vision," *Logos* 34 (1993): 19-20.

³⁷ I Cor. 10: 16b-17 RSV

³⁸ Ware, 20

³⁹ *Didache* 9.4; as cited by Ware, 20

⁴⁰ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist makes the church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in dialogue*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

turn to Patristics.⁴² De Lubac's principle seems to slip into Orthodox thought without difficulty.

Indeed, Ware goes to some length to defend the principle from patristic sources. He cites Ignatius of Antioch's letter *To the Philadelphians* as an example of a direct identity between the eucharist and church structures.

There is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his Blood, one altar ... just as there is one bishop, together with the presbyters and the deacons my fellow-servants.⁴³

Ware's perspective is supported by Jean Tillard who finds that in Ignatius:

the eucharist is the food of the unity that was won on the cross for it "gathers together all holy and faithful people both Jews and gentiles into the unique body which is the church."⁴⁴

As further evidence of the complementarity of the church and the eucharist, Ware reflects upon the double meaning of the term "*communio sanctorum*." As he indicates, *sanctorum* is a Latin noun that has both a masculine and a neuter gender. On the one hand, "*communio sanctorum*" refers to "communion of holy persons," the communion of saints. On the other hand, it refers to "communion in the holy things," eucharistic communion.⁴⁵

There is no need for us to make a choice between the two meanings, but it is possible – and, indeed, necessary – for us to assert *both* meanings simultaneously.⁴⁶

For Ware, the patristic reflection upon the communion of saints reflects an awareness of the intimate union of the people that occurs in eucharistic communion. Thus for Ware: "Ecclesial unity ... is created ... through the act of Holy Communion from the one Eucharistic loaf and the one chalice."⁴⁷

VI. Church: Local and Universal

There is a further distinction to note in the way in which east and west approach the Trinity. In the western churches, there is a tendency to avoid the pneumatological implications of various theological affirmations. The reason for this is a strong Christological priority in the west. From an

⁴² McPartlan cites Zizioulas' article "Ortodossia" in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*. (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1980).

⁴³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 4, as cited by Ware, 18.

⁴⁴ Tillard, 572, quoting Ignatius of Antioch, *Letters to the Smyrnaeans* 1.2, *to the Magnesians* 8.1-2, *to the Philadelphians* 4.

⁴⁵ Ware, 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

eastern perspective, a balance must be found. As we have seen, the eucharistic notion of the church carries an obvious Christological flavour. However, eucharistic theology carries pneumatological and eschatological flavours as well, particularly in the eastern articulation.

Zizioulas insists that the Pneumatology implied by the filioque manifests itself directly in an “ecclesiological filioquism.”⁴⁸ By prioritising the Christological over the pneumatological, western theology breaks down the fundamental equality between the Son and the Spirit. The Son becomes, with the Father, the source of the Spirit’s procession, and thus superior to the Spirit. “If Pneumatology is not ontologically constitutive of Christology, this can mean that there is first one Church and then many churches.”⁴⁹ The Christological ecclesiology of the west emphasises the priority of one church, Rome, over other churches elsewhere. The Church of Rome becomes the very principle of ecclesial unity, just as — by the filioque — Christ becomes the principle of trinitarian unity. This tendency is at the root of the Orthodox objections to the current practice of papal primacy.

Zizioulas notes that in the New Testament, the term “ekklesia” is normally accompanied by the genitive “of.” Paul “speaks on the one hand of the ‘church of God (or Christ),’ and on the other hand of the church or churches ‘of a certain place’ (Salonika, Macedonia, Judea, etc.)”⁵⁰ Zizioulas draws the conclusion that: “There is no church which can be conceived in herself, but only in relation to something else – in this case to God or Christ and to a certain locality, i.e. to the world around her.”⁵¹ It is on this point that one of Zizioulas’ distinctive contributions can be detected. The relative priority of the local and universal churches points clearly to the local church in Nicolas Afanasiev’s theology, and to some extent in Georges Florovsky’s. Zizioulas offers a more balanced view in which neither local nor universal takes priority. He articulates an Orthodox perspective on the local church that typically follows from the trinitarian conception of the church. According to Zizioulas, the local dimensions of ecclesiality have a certain experiential priority. However, this does not translate into a

⁴⁸ Zizioulas, “The church as communion,” 107.

⁴⁹ Zizioulas, *Being as communion*, 132.

⁵⁰ Zizioulas, “The church as communion,” 105.

⁵¹ Ibid.

church that is merely local, because a church that does not give expression to its catholicity is not truly apostolic and thus is not truly ecclesial. Apostolicity and catholicity are correlatives, together with the other marks of the church: unity and holiness.

The term “catholic” denotes “opposition to any ‘particularity.’ In early documents ... it was used ... to emphasize the integrity of her faith and doctrine, the loyalty of the Great Church to the original and primitive tradition. ...⁵²

In Zizioulas’ perspective, eucharistic ecclesiology contributes to the “localism” of the church. It is not incorrect to understand the eucharist in Christological terms. “The Church is the Body of Christ, which means that she is instituted through the one Christological event: she is one because Christ is one and she owes her being to this one Christ.”⁵³ Localism of the church occurs when the eucharist is understood exclusively in a Christological sense, and thus without a well-developed Pneumatology to inform it. Because, as we have seen, Zizioulas understands Christology in the context of Pneumatology, he sees Pentecost itself as “an ecclesologically constitutive event.” Challenging Afanasiev’s localism, Zizioulas says:

the nature of the eucharist points not in the direction of the priority of the local Church but in that of the simultaneity of both local and universal. There is only one eucharist, which is always offered in the name of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” The dilemma “local or universal” is transcended in the eucharist, and so is any dichotomy between Christology and Pneumatology.⁵⁴

In ecumenical theological discourse, there is a tendency towards cross-fertilisation. While many critics of the ecumenical movement would caution that this will lead to hybrid theology and a loss of historic identity, ecumenists see this as a sign of the growing catholicity in the theological reflection that is the gift of the ecumenical movement to the churches. One symptom of the prevalence of “theological borrowing” from other traditions is the failure to give appropriate credit to one’s sources. Ecumenical dialogue statements and individual theologians regularly build upon the contributions proposed by their dialogue partners. While this leads to a certain fecundity in the ecumenical soil, it makes it difficult to point to particular areas where theologians have learned from their dialogue

⁵² Florovsky, *Collected works*, 14: 33.

⁵³ Zizioulas, *Being as communion*, 132.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

partners. An illustration of an ongoing dispute in the Roman Catholic hierarchy gives some indication of the actual adoption of eastern perspectives by some Roman Catholics.

In recent months, a public dispute has arisen between two prominent Roman Catholic theologians, both cardinals and curial officials, Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper.⁵⁵ Their dispute is characterised by a fundamental difference regarding the status of the local church. For Ratzinger, the universal church is both historically and ontologically prior to the local, or particular, church. Though he does not say it, Ratzinger leaves one with the impression that the church of Rome is the archetype to which all other particular churches are related. For Kasper, the local church is the fundamental expression of the church of Christ, but only when it is bound together in bonds of communion with all other local churches in every time and place. The universal church is the visible expression of this communion. Communion is manifest in the bonds between each bishop and the bishop of Rome, in the episcopal conferences, and in the synods and ecumenical councils. Each of these expressions of communion is marked by collegiality and subsidiarity. Kasper's position is close to the eastern perspective with one significant distinction. Where Kasper repeats the traditional Roman claim of the pope as visible guarantor of unity (primacy), the Orthodox invest this role in the metropolitans and patriarchs.

A further example of a western theologian who appears to be enriched from eastern theological perspectives is Miroslav Volf. The two ecclesiological models which Ratzinger and Kasper represent are also discussed in Volf's 1998 book, *After our likeness*.⁵⁶ However, Volf chooses Zizioulas as the representative of the second model. For Volf, Ratzinger and Zizioulas represent the two great ecclesial models: Rome and Constantinople. Volf attempts to articulate a free church ecclesiology as a third alternative. It is beyond the purview of this essay to examine Volf's analysis of free church ecclesiology. However, his choice of Ratzinger and Zizioulas as dialogue partners is interesting. Unlike McPartlan's comparison of de Lubac and Zizioulas, Volf draws the conclusion that his two specimen theologians are representative of their respective traditions. This is unfortunate, as Kasper

⁵⁵ Walter Kasper, "On the church: a friendly reply to Cardinal Ratzinger," *America* 184:14 (2001): 8-14.

⁵⁶ Miroslav Volf, *After our likeness: the church as the image of the Trinity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

demonstrates the error in the presumption that the Catholic tradition is ecclesiologically uniform.

The Orthodox tradition is similarly diverse with respect to ecclesiology. In fact, when contrasted with Catholic ecclesiologies, Orthodoxy's distinguishing feature is its greater accommodation of diversity.

Kasper's position appears much closer to Zizioulas' than to Ratzinger's, though Zizioulas' has a distinctively Orthodox flavour.

VII. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to indicate the contributions of the Orthodox churches to the ecumenical reflection on ecclesiology. Although the major contribution of Orthodoxy may have been the notion of *koinonia* or communion, the significance of this theme does not become clear until one explores the trinitarian dimensions of ecclesiology and its implications for theological anthropology, the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, and the relationships between the local and universal churches. I hope that this paper has assisted in this exploration.

In recent years the Orthodox churches have challenged the WCC, accusing it of a liberal bias and a failure to hear the voice of Orthodoxy in formulating its agenda or issuing its public statements. A number of Orthodox churches have threatened to withdraw from membership in the Council, and indeed the Romanian Orthodox Church has already done so. The Russian Orthodox are the most vociferous critics, although they have remained at least partial participants in the Council's work. The Orthodox churches have always given a greater degree of support and interest to the work of the Faith and Order Commission, which might naturally result in the alleged failure of the Council to hear their concerns within the other sections and commissions. Since the Harare Assembly in 1998, the Council has engaged in a process of discernment along with various other ecumenical bodies, and the Christian World Communions. The process is intended to develop a forum in which democratic processes alone do not determine the result. It is hoped that the Orthodox churches, and others who have remained outside of the Council, will find it more compelling to participate in the new forum.

It has been said that Orthodox churches conceive of their role within the broad panorama of churches as the repositories of the apostolic and patristic faith. Their role is to preserve for future generations a faith that has survived for centuries. If this is true, then the continuing participation of

the Orthodox in ecumenical circles is essential. Now is the moment when western churches are most open to the contributions of the east.

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