

EVANGELICAL ORTHODOX ECCLESIOLOGY: LIVING TRADITION

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In the twentieth century it is quite possible that there is a need for a contemporary adjustment to the ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church as it is expressed in its canonical legislation; that is, if the Orthodox Church is going to maintain the ancient and divine mission and witness to which it was commissioned by its Lord.¹

In this last quarter of the twentieth century the Orthodox Church and Orthodox theologians find themselves in a very peculiar and divided situation. In Eastern Europe, where most Orthodox Christians live, political conditions are making any expression of living theology very difficult. The Church survives in the limited framework of its liturgical life, which the State tolerates as an outdated museum-piece. Quite different is the situation in the West. No formal limitations stand in the way of full intellectual freedom. This is not to say that Orthodoxy does not face temptations which are more subtle and in a sense more dangerous than those of the Orthodox in Eastern Europe. In the West there is a crisis of liturgical tradition and canonical chaos which gives clear indication that there is a failure to use the God-given freedom to the glory of God.

The task of Orthodoxy in the West, where it has been driven by persecution, is made even more urgent and obvious by the fact that non-Orthodox Christendom, as well as the secular non-Christian world, provides numerous opportunities for an articulate witness. There is a profound need in the West to hear the Gospel of Christ contained in the Orthodox tradition. Yet years and years have gone by with hardly the beginning of a true evangelical witness to the West. Orthodoxy is still "the best kept secret" in this hemisphere in the midst of a profound spiritual hunger everywhere. Orthodoxy must not fail in the face of this opportunity. But to do so, it may need to realize that the Holy Spirit has already made the task possible by "blowing where He wills"² and preparing a harvest field and laborers for the harvest³ outside of the present traditional boundaries of what would usually be called the canonical Orthodox Church.

¹Reference to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 18-20 (NASV).

²Reference to the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 8 (KJV).

³Reference to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 9, verses 37-38 (NASV).

This task of recognition may be difficult for the canonically Orthodox, but it is nevertheless essential. There will be a definite need to reconsider what it means to have a powerful and "living tradition."

The Concern for a Living Tradition

In the preface of his book entitled, Living Tradition, Rev. John Meyendorff says the following:

"How is the Orthodox Christian to maintain and witness to his faith in the complicated and challenging world of the twentieth century? There can be no answer to this challenge of our age without living tradition."⁴

This truly is a pressing question for all Orthodox Christians, including those within the synodal communion of the Evangelical Orthodox Church. We no longer consider ourselves a "denomination within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church"⁵, but rather a synodal grouping of communing Orthodox churches within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. We consider ourselves to have been raised up by the Holy Spirit to spread "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints"⁶ in the modern Western culture. We believe ourselves to have a Spirit-anointed apostolate as the origin of our episcopacy to serve us in this mission. Therefore this question raised by Fr. Meyendorff is certainly one that we must address as well.

At least two questions might be raised by this new understanding of ourselves in the minds of the more canonically-minded Orthodox believers. 1) How can a group of Orthodox churches suddenly spring up seemingly out of nowhere apart from the mission endeavors of a contemporary Orthodox witness? And, 2) How can such churches have a proper episcopacy--without the ordinary channels of "apostolic succession"--to lead them into the fullness of the Orthodox faith and mission?

These questions shall be addressed more fully later on in this treatise, but first let it suffice to point out that these questions are both "canonical" questions. That is, they are concerned about the keeping of the proper rules or laws of the

⁴ John Meyendorff, Living Tradition (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p. 7.

⁵ Reference to past brochures and stationery of Evangelical Orthodox Church which no longer are applicable.

⁶ Reference to the Epistle of Jude, verse 3 (KJV).

Orthodox Church. These two questions want to know about canonical "lawfulness" as expressed during the Byzantine period of the Orthodox Church in the Middle Ages. Our existence as the Evangelical Orthodox Church begs the question of the present spiritual validity of these canons in the twentieth century. It provokes a crisis of thought in regard to Orthodox ecclesiology. It is this question of the spiritual validity of some canonical elements of the Orthodox Church's tradition that must be addressed first.

We of the Evangelical Orthodox Church are certainly concerned about the "tradition" of the Orthodox Church. Along with the Scriptures, we love the tradition of the Orthodox Church. We even understand that the Scriptures cannot rightly be interpreted apart from the tradition of the Church. However, with Fr. Meyendorff, we would say:

"Of necessity, any Orthodox theology and any Orthodox witness is traditional, in the sense that it is consistent not only with Scripture but also with the experience of the Fathers and the saints, as well as with the continuous celebration of Christ's death and resurrection in the liturgy of the Church. However the term "traditional theology" can also denote a dead theology, if it means identifying traditionalism with a simple repetition. Such a theology may prove incapable of recognizing the issues of its own age, while it presents yesterday's arguments to confront new heresies.

In fact, dead traditionalism cannot be truly traditional. It is an essential characteristic of patristic theology that it was able to face the challenge of its own time while remaining consistent with the original apostolic Orthodox faith. Thus simply to repeat what the Fathers said is to be unfaithful to their spirit and to the intention embodied in their theology."⁷

As Fr. Meyendorff goes on to point out, St. Athanasius, the great Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century--St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and St. Gregory of Nyssa--are true pillars of Orthodoxy in that they succeeded in preserving the faith in the face of two great dangers. They were able to fight and overcome the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ, while not allowing Greek philosophy to subjugate the faith to its categories of thinking. They provided a contemporary terminology borrowed from Greek philosophy to solve a difficult theological controversy. Thus, the Greek word

⁷Op. cit., John Meyendorff.

"homoousion," meaning "consubstantial," though not a Biblical word, could be used to help reveal the mystery of the Holy Trinity, a term which has been forever enshrined in the Nicene Creed. They did not simply deny the validity of Greek philosophy, but demonstrated that its best intuitions could successfully be used in Christian theology, provided one accepted the Gospel of Christ as the ultimate criterion of truth.

With this historical example in mind, Fr. Meyendorff goes on to explain what he means by "living tradition:"

"Thus for us to be 'traditional' implies an imitation of the Fathers in their creative work of discernment. Like them we must be dedicated to the task of saving human beings from error, and not just maintaining abstract propositional truths. We must imitate their constant effort to understand their contemporaries and to use words and concepts which could truly reach the minds of the listeners. True tradition is always a living tradition. It changes while remaining always the same. It changes because it faces different situations, not because its essential content is modified. This content is not an abstract proposition; it is the Living Christ Himself, who said, 'I am the Truth.'"⁸

The Concern for a Living Ecclesiology

I would suggest that what is true for theology, as expressed above by Fr. Meyendorff, is also true for ecclesiology. For theology and ecclesiology can never be finally separated from one another in the mystical Body of Christ.

In the fourth century a contemporary terminology was needed to preserve the faith "once and for all delivered" by the apostles. The Church rose to the occasion by offering a "living tradition," which presented the ancient and divine faith in a contemporary mode of expression.

In the twentieth century we may be in need of a contemporary adjustment to Orthodox ecclesiology, as expressed in the canons, to maintain the ancient and divine mission and witness of the Church. Who will rise to this occasion?

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

The Church: A Divine and Human Entity

Maximos, Metropolitan of Sardes for the Greek Orthodox Church and counselor to the ecumenical patriarch, states in a chapter entitled The Canons of the Church, of a recent book that he has written:

"The designation of the Church as the mystical body of Christ and the inseparable union within it of the divine and human under one head, the one Lord, make possible the solution of various important problems. One of these is the question of what should be the criterion in determining the contents of the canons....

The Church on earth, inseparably linked with the Kingdom of God in heaven through its divine head, is the sole organization in the history of mankind to transcend this world. Human and divine are harmoniously united within it; indivisibly, yet without confusion.

The true Church, therefore, is not merely a visible human organization in the world, nor is it solely a divine invisible body above and beyond the world. Rather it is single and indivisible, visible and invisible, divine and human, existing at once both in heaven and in earth, both within time and in eternity. This principle is of fundamental importance both for the entire organization of the Church and for the satisfactory solution of problems concerning the internal order of the Church which are complicated precisely because the Church is essentially both a human and divine entity, in which the transient is continuously involved and intertwined with the eternal, the visible with the invisible, the divine with the human, the changeable with the unchangeable."⁹

The visible Church on earth is then the organic and organized expression in the world of the unique and indivisible, divine and human Body of Christ. It is indissolubly linked to its divine head and carries on in the world the redeeming work of Christ. The founding of the Church as a visible society in the world, hierarchically organized, is clearly the prerogative of the same Lord who is both God and man. It is He who equipped it with its fundamental laws and with the appropriate organs and means to fulfill its earthly mission. The

⁹ Maximos, Metropolitan of Sardes; The Oecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church: A Study in History and Canons of the Church (Thessaloniki, Greece: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1976), p. 253.

Lord is not only the Redeemer of the world, He is its Law-giver. It follows then that as the Church has received from its founder a commission and power, it will develop and institute whatever is required to function normally as an institution, taking the Holy Scriptures as its fundamental principle.

The Church's Canons: Eternal and Temporal

With all of this in mind concerning the full nature of the Church in mind, and the power resident within it to establish legislation, let us remember that the canons of the Church were gradually promulgated, regulating the life of the Church in its earthly aspect. As these canons are derived from the very essence of the Church and act in harmony with it, they enshrine the unchangeable essence of the Church within the changing conditions of history. They are the eternal, visible, historical and changeable expressions of the unchangeable element: the doctrines of the faith.

In his chapter on the canons of the Orthodox Church, Bishop Maximos says:

"Since the historical conditions under which the Church has been called on occasion to fulfill its saving mission have not remained stable or unchanged, the life of the Church and the ecclesiastical laws which govern it have developed parallel with the change and development in the external conditions....

This gradual promulgation of the canons, linked to the Christian communities' periodic needs which the Church attempted to meet with its laws, has led certain Orthodox theologians to argue as follows: lying behind the canons are the Church's extensive and varied interests leading it to give its children a guide-line to enable them to identify basic questions soundly and to deal with them correctly; further, the needs of its children have altered in much and are continually altering, alongside the circumstances of society and the effect of the passage of time and of modern conceptions."¹⁰

"It is consequently self-evident that the Church not only can but must adapt its laws to these new needs, by modifying or even abolishing canons that have

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 254

come to be useless or impractical, and must promulgate new ones as they become necessary."¹¹

This last assertion by Bishop Maximos is a bold one. However, if it were to be seriously considered in the present era, what light and clarity might enter the blindness and confusion of the contemporary Church!

In all fairness, however, Bishop Maximos points out that not all Orthodox Christians are prepared to accept his observations regarding the canons. He identifies a group that he calls "extreme conservatives", who reject any possibility of change or modification in the canons. He also points out a group that he calls "extreme liberals", who unhesitatingly regard any discussion whatsoever about the canons as completely useless, sterile and casuistical, as revolving around laws which, if they are not dead, are certainly well on the way to the grave.

It is to the extreme conservatives that we desire to reply in this treatise. In support of their belief about the immutable nature of the Church's canons, they rely chiefly upon canon two of the Council of Trullo and secondarily on the first canon of the seventh ecumenical council. The second canon of Trullo reads thus:

"To these there is to no adding, and from them there is to be no taking away."¹²

Yet, as Bishop Maximos points out, all serious theologians and canonists know that this statement is taken completely out of context. The canon does not refer to the legislative power of the Church in the future, since the Church has continually been led by the Holy Spirit to use its legislative power to create, adapt, modify, and abolish canons. The very act of this council in writing this canon is a perfect example of the same. Rather, in the words of Apostolos Christodoulos' commentary on this canon and its parallel from II Nicea:

"The wording of this canon (two of Trullo) does not concern itself with the Church's legislative power to change or ratify the canons."¹³

"...it prohibits any falsification or adulteration in the code as ratified, or replacement of the canons

¹¹ Ibid., p. 255.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid.

recognized by the Church with spuria written by unscrupulous persons."¹⁴

"The second canon of the Council of Trullo thus contains no suggestion that the canonical and disciplinary regulations of the canonical code are unchangeable and immovable, still less that this immovability must be understood in the same sense as that of the Holy Scriptures. Nor does the council put the canonical ordinances of the preceding councils on a par in importance for Christians with their dogmatic definitions. The direct sense of the words of the canon is to forbid any Christian, whatever his position in the Church, to change, pervert, replace, or adulterate the canons on his own authority. There is absolutely no mention in the canon of acts of the legislative of the Church, or of its prerogatives to develop and change earlier laws."¹⁵

What is the conclusion of this discussion about the divine and human nature of the Church and the relationship of the canons of the Orthodox Church to this truth? The "extreme liberal" position must be rejected because it does not properly recognize the "divine" nature of the Church, i.e. its eternal dimension. The "extreme conservative" position must also be rejected because it does not recognize the "human" nature of the Church. Just as debates have raged over the centuries in regard to Christology and fomented the ecumenical councils, which kept an eye on right doctrine, that Christ is both fully God and man. So, one must be sure that ecclesiology is kept in mind in the same way. The Church must be recognized as both divine and human. Its canons must be seen to contain both an eternal and a temporal dimension. Further illustration is needed.

This disagreement and controversy amongst the canonists, both extreme liberals and extreme conservatives, is clearly attributed to a different theological conception of the sense and purpose of the canons. The gravest error of the extreme liberals lies in their seeing the canons as having the characteristics of secular laws, i.e. as administrative decrees which are automatically changed if only the appropriate text can be found. Yet, it is here that the problem lies, in that a canon is not purely a legal text. This would be to see the canons in a too "human" way. A canon is a demonstration of the way in which, in a given situation, the eternal unchangeable essence of the Church must be revised and expressed. We must recognize the divine element of the Church's legislation.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁵ Ibid.

But the point of view of the extreme conservatives must be seen to be equally erroneous. They start from the secure theological conception that the Holy Canons, at least those of the ecumenical councils, are the "divine law", the seeds of which are contained in the Scriptures, but which have been developed and elucidated. However, they err in seeing them in a too "divine" way. They forget that it is the Holy Spirit working in the Church which gives the Church this power to create "divine legislation", and which invested these canons with authority. They fail to remember that the very act of making canons to apply the Scriptures to various changing historical circumstances is to acknowledge this temporal necessity. By making the Church in every age continually unable to alter or adjust these canons to their historical situation, they make the authority of the canons higher than the Church itself which instituted them. They make the Church lower than its creation and permanently subject to its creation. They put upon the Church the heavy burden of resurrecting many conditions of life and needs which have disappeared.

These extreme conservatives should recall and heed the words of Jesus: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath."¹⁶ The extremely conservative Pharisees liked to question Jesus about his periodic breaking of their canons. Jesus regularly became angry with them over this because they continually put their canons above the genuine needs of the people of God, who came to be healed and to be fed and to be cared for in a pastoral way. Their values were entirely upside down. Close examination of Christ's words in the Gospel of Mark indicate that He properly prioritized what their hierarchy of values ought to be. He declared that he was "Lord even of the Sabbath" as the Son of Man. Second, He proclaimed that men who are in the image of God, were given the Sabbath as a gift--that the Sabbath was specifically made for them. (How much more so is this true for those who are "deified"?) Thus, the canons come third in this prioritization, as the servants of those who belong to God. Legalism has been and still is one of the great heresies that the Church has had to face--often from within. Let us say it clearly: the canons were made for the Church, not the Church for the canons.

What is the correct view of the canons, then, that keeps away from the two poles of error? Bishop Maximos puts it succinctly:

¹⁶Reference to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, verse 27 (KJV).

"...the canons are the form in which the unchangeable essence of the Church is enshrined in the changing circumstances of history."¹⁷

Bishop Maximos goes on to make an even more definitive statement:

"It cannot consequently be denied that it is the Church which possesses and always will possess the right to change in a legitimate fashion anything in its earlier canons which it finds needing to be changed or corrected. This right is inseparably connected with the essence of the Church's legislative power."¹⁸

The function of the canons and of ecclesiastical law in general is intended as a creative and protective element to help the Church's life to approach as far as possible the "divine life" it was intended to live--to approach the dogmatic teaching on the mystery of the Church, to live as much as possible as the kingdom of heaven come to earth. This again is the "divine" concern for truth and practice that must be "enshrined". As Bishop Maximos says, "no ecclesiastical form can be seen to exhaust the mystery of the Church, but only to come near it".¹⁹ And this approaching of the mystery is relative to the historical moment at which it occurs. For this reason any absolutist form of Church organization is quite unacceptable, because it confuses the empirical, relative and particularist expression of the Church with its unchangeable essence. The various historical forms are connected to one another absolutely by the dogmatic teaching underlying them. This teaching is of single essence, but expressed in varying forms. Any modification or change should therefore appear not only as a readjustment to historical conditions, but equally as a desire for fuller expression of the ecclesiastical mystery under new conditions and presuppositions. As Bishop Maximos expresses it:

"No change is legitimate except when the new structure of the Church expresses more clearly and extensively than the old the eternal dogmatic truth of the Church. We are free to modify, or even to create new forms, but we are not always entitled to do this. In this question, as in the whole life of the Church,

¹⁷Op. cit.; Maximos of Sardes, p. 258.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 260-261.

great courage must always be accompanied by immense prudence and by faith and devotion to tradition."²⁰

Finally, Bp. Maximos says:

"We therefore can and must modify ecclesiastical laws, but only when the canons have ceased to be genuine canons, when they have ceased to fulfill their mission; when they no longer, in other words, express in life the eternal truth behind the canons."²¹

Every canon of the Church, then, is some "eternal" and "divine" concern expressed in a "human" and "temporal" historical situation. In order to change a canon of the Church, one must first determine its divine and eternal concern. Then, any change in the canon should adjust the Church in its historical situation closer to the incarnating of that eternal truth in practice.

The Evangelical Orthodox Church: A Living Ecclesiology

Let us return to the canonical problems posed in the introduction of this treatise. The existence of the Evangelical Orthodox Church in its present ecclesiastical form provokes questions regarding the spiritual validity of some of the canons of the Orthodox Church. Our existence begs the question of whether or not some of the contemporary Orthodox views of what it means to be "canonically Orthodox" have begun to become antiquated. A great deal of time has passed since the Byzantine Empire existed. The modern Western world that much of Orthodoxy finds itself living within, has changed radically. The situations of life addressed in the ecumenical canons do not exist in much of the world. Not too many empires exist any longer. Few nations see the Church as the "soul" of their governmental enterprise. The old Roman dioceses no longer exist in their true historical sense. How long will those becoming Orthodox Christians be forced to live under the "Byzantine captivity", as this canonical problem has often been called? And, it is one thing to have been born Orthodox, having the responsibility, perhaps, to carry on a certain "heritage". It is quite another thing to have been "untimely born"²² outside the heritage of one of the ethnic Orthodox jurisdictions by a pure spiritual baptism in the early Fathers of the Church, apart from any contemporary Orthodox mission. What are the true spiritual

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Reference to the First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 8 (NKJV).

responsibilities of such a birthing in a Church which found a way to merge Jews and Gentiles without placing one under the hierarchy of another, or without placing all the "laws" and "cultural concerns" of one upon the other in the past?

The question was: How can a group of Orthodox churches suddenly spring up from seemingly out of nowhere apart from the mission endeavors of a contemporary Orthodox witness? The first part of this question needs to receive a simple logical response: No Christians come "ex nihilo" from out of nowhere! To have any knowledge of God, of Christ, of His Church requires the witness of someone from within the stream of Faith that has come down to us through the centuries. The problem of the Evangelical Orthodox Church is not that it comes up from nowhere, but rather --in the minds of some--that it comes up surprisingly out of the Western tradition of the Faith, and more specifically it has its roots primarily in the Protestant tradition.

We can trace our lineage of the Faith back through Christendom the same way that anyone else can. We simply have to trace our lineage back through our Protestant forbearers, to the Roman Catholic witness, to the period of the Church when there was no demarcation between Eastern and Western Christianity. We did not come from "out of nowhere". We simply have been born "on the wrong side of the tracks" in the eyes of many Orthodox Christians. And though we have had a true Orthodox conversion in our hearts, they are still unwilling to recognize this and acknowledge our true existence.

We cannot help the "accident" of our birthing, for it is nothing of which we should be ashamed. We simply were born in the waters of baptism in the Protestant family, while our parents were in reaction to many of the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. However, every child must grow up and decide whether he or she holds the faith of their parents in exactly the same way. While not despising our parenting in the least, we have discovered a "more perfect way" by reading the Fathers of the Church. And, we did not discover this "more perfect way" as individuals, but rather as wholly developed communities of believers involving their whole ecclesiastical structures. Here we are: full communities of believers with our own orders. We would like to "cross the tracks", so to speak, and be received by the rest of the ancient Orthodox Christian communities. However, we do not desire to be despised for our race, customs, or ways of doing things--unless it can be patently shown that they are completely unchristian, in the true essential character of that word.

In short, if Gentiles did not have to become Jews to become Christians in the early centuries, is it right to make Americans become Russians, or Greeks, or Antiochians (Syrians), or even Byzantines to become Christians? In Christ "there is neither Jew

nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female", for all are "one in Christ Jesus".²³ Can there not be an American, or Canadian, or Swedish Orthodoxy, which is legitimately and fully Orthodox? I think there can be, and perhaps already is--though small at present, or the Gospel will not be nearly as much "good news"!

The second part of the question which has been posed: "...apart from this mission endeavors, etc."--can be answered without the use of later historical models. For, the Holy Scriptures themselves provide us with an excellent model.

Did not the twelve apostles constitute the original apostolic witness and "succession"? Were they not appointed by Christ to go into all the world and preach the gospel? The answer, of course, is: "Yes". Then why was there need of the Resurrected Lord to also call Saul, a persecutor of Christians, to become St. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles? Why did the Lord "knock him down" upon the road to Damascus and commission him as well?

The answer to this question is given in the Scriptures themselves. The Acts of the Apostles in chapters 10 and 11 shows us what great difficulty the Jewish Christians--and even the Apostle Peter--had in receiving the new Gentile converts like Cornelius. Peter needed three successive visions on the rooftop in Joppa to be persuaded that going to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, was not "unclean". After having witnessed the baptism of the Gentiles in the Holy Spirit, Peter is astounded that God is "no respecter of persons".²⁴ He seems to have thought that God might be especially partial to the Jews alone prior to that. The Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem called Peter "on the carpet" for admitting Gentiles to the faith and only relented after they are told by Peter that they received the same baptism as the apostles on Pentecost, and that to deny the event upon the Gentiles was to deny their own spiritual baptism.

Even after all of this, the Acts of the Apostles tells us in chapter 11, verse 19, that they spoke "to no one except Jews alone" until certain Jews of the diaspora brought the gospel to Antioch. And even after Gentiles began to be converted in the city of Antioch, we still read in the Epistle to the Galatians of how St. Paul had to withstand St. Peter to his face over this

²³ Epistle to the Galatians, chapter 2, verse 11 (NASV)

²⁴ Reference to Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, verses 34b-35 (NASV).

same issue when St. Peter came to Antioch at a later date.²⁵ We also read about St. Paul's continual bouts with the Judaizers in much of the rest of the New Testament until finally it is necessary for a full church council to be held in Jerusalem to begin to solve this controversy created by them.²⁶

It would seem that it could be said that the first ecumenical council was actually held in Jerusalem, and that the first controversy with which the Church was confronted was the problem of "canons (requirements regarding circumcision, etc.) and the spiritual mission of the Church"; and that the work of the Holy Spirit triumphed over "the letter of the Law".

The calling and anointing of the "Apostle" Paul was for a thorough-going mission to the Gentiles in their own culture. God had created a Jewish Christianity on Pentecost in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Now, through the continuous outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the efforts of St. Paul and other apostles like himself, there was to be a Greek and a Latin Christianity. New apostles were chosen for the work as the gospel and the ecclesiology of the church went transcultural.

Has this not happened over and over again in the life of the Orthodox Church? This is also what we believe is happening in the creation of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, like St. Paul, seemingly coming from out of nowhere. We have a unique witness to the Western culture of America, Canada, Sweden, etc. And we believe that the Holy Spirit has given us some gifted and anointed men as our unique apostles to bring the Orthodox faith and practice to these Western cultures. Many of these gifted men have formed the beginning of our episcopacy. As with the early apostles, they became the bishops of churches where no other bishop or apostle had ever before labored.

It is the fervent hope of our apostles and bishops that the Orthodox Church leaders, who have migrated to this country bringing their Eastern culture with them, and who can trace their "apostolic succession" so carefully, will also find a way to extend to our church leaders "the right hand of fellowship" and communion, as the Twelve did so long ago to those apostles who were going to the Gentiles--those very fortunate and blessed people who became the Orthodox Church. It is our hope that they "will do unto others, what has been done unto them"! We believe that we represent Orthodox churches as well!

²⁵Reference to the Epistle to the Galatians, chapter 2, verse 11 (NASV).

²⁶Reference to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15.

We may not have a contemporary Orthodox witness as the beginning of our mission. But perhaps that is more the fault of the Orthodox Church in the Western world than ours. As soon as we heard the Orthodox gospel through the vehicle of reading the ancient Fathers of the Church, we responded. Our "hearing" came directly from the ancient Fathers. Certainly the Orthodox Church believes in the "communion of the saints". Well, we were evangelized by the writings of St. Clement, St. Ignatius, St. Cyprian, St. Irenaeus, St. Justin Martyr, St. Athanasius, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Chrysostom, St. Leo the Great, and St. Gregory Palamas, to name just a few--and the list goes on and on by now. Do the saints not pray in heaven for us? Can they ask the Spirit of God to be sent upon us for an Orthodox witness to be accomplished in the world through us as well? If there has not been found anyone who go to us and witness, cannot the Holy Spirit Himself come and anoint new apostles, give them the writings of the Fathers, and send them on their way? He found the persecutor Saul and sent him to the house of Cornelius. Who would have expected such a thing as that? Certainly this must be possible, for the gospel is "good news"!

The Evangelical Orthodox Church: A Canonical Problem

But what about these married bishops of the Evangelical Orthodox Church? If it is true that the Holy Spirit may have appointed them in a genuine spiritual "economy", what about this "canonical problem" of their being married? This cannot be allowed according to the canons of the Orthodox Church.

It must be noted that their are married bishops at present in the Anglican Church and in some other traditions that claim to have apostolic succession. And, it must also be remembered that married bishops have occurred even in the Orthodox Church in the distant past. The thought of married bishops is not absolutely foreign to the thinking of Christendom. It isn't as if this question has never come up before.

Recent Orthodox writers have begun to talk about canons of "exactness" and canons of "economia" as a way of thinking about the canonical problem of the Orthodox Church. Canons of "exactness" refer to ecclesiastical canons whose wording and essence can be traced directly to the Holy Scriptures, and which therefore form the basis for considering the "eternal truth" of a specific piece of canonical legislation. Canons of "economia", on the other hand, refer to canons which have altered the original wording of such canons of "exactness" found in the Scriptures in order to continue the "eternal truth" held in common behind both canons.

Let me illustrate these two types of canons, while advancing the concern of this treatise at the same time. When St. Paul says to St. Timothy:

"This is a true saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife,...one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)..."²⁷

This is an example of a canon of "exactness", since it comes from the Scriptures and is a piece of apostolic legislation regarding the selection of a bishop.

Notice that the original canon regarding the marital status of bishops is that they be the "husband of one wife". It is true that this legislation is probably not a command to have a wife, but rather about what will accomplish the good and holy administration of the Church. Nevertheless, note that not only is it permitted for a bishop to have a wife, it seems quite natural to assume that he will have one.

Later decisions by the ecumenical synods of the Orthodox Church which changed this canon of "exactness" in order to write one of "economia" were certainly concerned about continuing the "eternal concern" of the good and holy administration of the Church. The Church of that era was plagued by many unholy men, who were both married and practicing nepotism in regard to their episcopates, who were all the while enjoying all the pleasures of life. We can appreciate the spiritual discernment of this decision to move to a canon of "economia", which required celibacy of any candidates for the episcopate. However, it must be noted that this was a change. Furthermore, historians will note that this change was debated for centuries by the Church before it was enacted, and that many famous celibates argued against such a change, such as the celebrated Paphnutius.²⁸

It would seem that if a canon of "exactness" could be altered in regard to the episcopate in order to adjust with true "economia" to the times and the need, then a return to the canon of "exactness" when the times were appropriate would not only be possible, but of great benefit to the Church.

²⁷ Reference to the First Epistle to Timothy, chapter 3, verses 1-2a, 4-5 (NKJV).

²⁸ A full account of this debate is given in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979); Second Series, Vol. XIV, pp. 51-52.

It seems to those of us in the Evangelical Orthodox Church, that such a time has come to return to the canon of "exactness" in regard to the episcopacy. It is evident to the eyes of all Orthodox Christians that the episcopacy is shrinking due to the laws of celibacy, that much immorality has plagued the episcopacy and many celibate priests, and that the eucharistic and pastoral integrity of the Orthodox Church has been compromised by continuing this canonical status. It is time for a change.

Is it possible that the Holy Spirit is using the development of Orthodox bodies such as the Evangelical Orthodox Church to stir the Church to reconsider its canonical viewpoint? We of the E.O.C. believe that this is true, and we are willing to witness to this viewpoint even if it means that we cannot be received into communion with other Orthodox jurisdictions at the present time due to their canonical perspectives.

If the Orthodox Church is unwilling even to seriously consider the possibility of returning to a married episcopate, along with its celibate episcopate, then it would seem that their canon of "economia" has now been inappropriately elevated to the position of a canon of "exactness", and that the Holy Scriptures have become inferior to later tradition and to be regarded in an "economic" fashion. God forbid!

The Need for a Radical Faith

Since the word "radical" means to return to the "root" of a matter, then it would seem to be time for "radical" faith on the part of the members of the Evangelical Orthodox Church. In the face of being denied communion with many of our Orthodox brethren because of our canonical irregularities, we will need to show some courage and patience. We will have to believe that the return to a "living tradition" and "ecclesiology" is worth the price of being ostracized.

We did not plan to be in this mess when we began. We simply followed the leading of the Holy Spirit from our evangelical heritage on into more and more fullness of the Church. We have been faithful to our spiritual guides, who though having passed from this world, yet speak through their writings and prayers on our behalf. We must be faithful to this heavenly guidance from the communion of these saints, while at the same time remembering the heritage which we ourselves have received from our tradition.

Gennadios Limouris defines this process in the following fashion, when he writes in St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly:

"...the Church is not a kingdom of this world, but the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit, and therefore its rules and principles are not those of human government.

Earlier we asked: what holds the Church together? And we answered: not outward power of jurisdiction, but communion in the holy mysteries. We may ask further: what constitutes the final authority in the Church? According to our different traditions, we tend to reply: the Bible, or the Ecumenical Council or the Pope. Yet none of these things can truly constitute our final authority. Just as it is wrong to externalize our notion of unity, making the oneness of the Church depend on outward power of jurisdiction, so it is wrong to externalize our notion of authority, identifying it with the letter of Scripture, the institution of the Council, or the person and office of the Pope. All these are important, but none of them is final. The final authority in the Church is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who is the true author and interpreter of the inspired Word of God, who directs Councils, who guides bishops, patriarchs and popes. When challenged about our doctrine of authority, surely we cannot do better than reply with the promise of our Lord: 'When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth' (John 16:13)."²⁹

We must not be ashamed of being guided in this way, for we are in good company. Many of the famous saints have been ostracized by the surrounding religious community at one time or another. St. Maximos the Confessor, when encompassed by all the bishops and theologians of his day and told that he held his position on the "two wills of Christ" all alone against the rest of the Church, said "then I alone must be the Catholic Church."

St. Symeon the New Theologian and St. Gregory Palamas were also confronted by the ecclesiastical authorities of their day. The Rev. Alexander Schmemmann says of them:

"For them it was not an outward authority requiring blind submission. They lived in the tradition and perceived it from within as a unity of

²⁹ Gennadios Limouris; St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly, "The Church: A Mystery of Unity in Diversity" (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987); Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 130-131.

faith and experience; they were aware of it as the fruit of the same Spirit that had inspired the Fathers as well. For them, as for the earlier Fathers, theology was not abstract knowledge but 'the work of life and the creative solution of vital problems'. They were free, precisely because they had in themselves and their religious experience the criterion for their unity in faith with the Fathers and with tradition. Though the way of mysticism is a special one, set apart in a special sphere of theology, all genuine theology is mystical at root, since it is primarily evidence of religious experience. In the course of spiritual endeavor, creativeness, and effort the strength of true tradition is revealed. Otherwise it turns into a dead historical document, binding the mind with abstract and meaningless formulas."³⁰

One cannot account for the rise of the Evangelical Orthodox Church apart from a genuine work of the Holy Spirit. Can such a thing happen by the sheer efforts of men? How many people in the West have even heard of the "best kept secret" of Orthodoxy? Of those who have heard of the Orthodox Church, how many would be willing to try to witness to and build such a church in the Western culture? Of those who might be willing, how many could have come this far? How do those prejudiced from their births by the Protestant tradition against anything that looks even remotely Roman Catholic ever find, witness to, and build a communion of Orthodox churches? What else can the E.O.C. be other than a miracle from God!

For those of us who have been members of the Evangelical Orthodox Church for many years now, this church has been the "work of our lives" and the "creative solution to our vital spiritual problems". In the course of our spiritual endeavor, creativeness, and effort, the strength of our love for the true tradition of the Church has been revealed. We are no dead entity. We, by the grace of God, are alive in the Spirit!

What if we do not see the recognition of our communion of Orthodox churches by the rest of Orthodoxy in our lifetime? This is a problem for God and the continuing Orthodox Church. But remember, St. Maximos the Confessor died outside the acceptance of the Orthodox Church of his contemporaries. However, within one hundred years he was recognized by everyone as one of its greatest saints. How like the prophets of Israel was his life. This is often the lot of prophets and other prophetic voices. Such a witness takes faith and courage--and a radical approach to the Faith!

³⁰ Alexander Schmemmann, Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1977), p. 235.

Let these saints that I have mentioned be an example for us. We desire communion with the Orthodox Church, but not at the expense of a living ecclesiology. No contemporary expression of Orthodoxy can be absolute guarantors of the boundaries of the Church. Such decisions always rise up in the spiritual consciousness of the Church in succeeding generations, as the fruit and witness of all are examined. We may have to wait for the verdict of the generations to come. May God have mercy upon us and grant us acceptance sooner than that.

We have faith that the Evangelical Orthodox Church possesses a true charismatic and mystical experience of the Church with its true and living tradition. We must work for a "true communion" with the rest of the Orthodox Church, but not a "false union" under this subjugating hierarchy of some ethnic jurisdiction. For as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann says, "true unity...is not nourished by 'official' ties but by living communion, particularly by a constant effort to overcome natural division by the unity of grace."³¹

Answering the Neo-Judaizers

No true work of the Holy Spirit can simply flourish without the interference of enemies, whether intentional or unintentional. This has been true throughout the history of both Israel, as witnessed in the Old Testament, and the Church. All of the godly in Christ must suffer.

The enemies are not always outside the Church either. While St. Paul suffered at the hands of the pagans of Ephesus and other places on his various missionary journeys, he also suffered from the continual interference of the Judaizers. It is not clear whether these Judaizers were always in or outside the Church of that era. Often they may have been well-meaning Christians who were simply a little too attached to their own ethnic brand of the faith. They had too much of an affinity for legalism, which attached itself to the Law with all of its ceremonialism and beauty, and not too tight a grip on the Gospel as the "good news" of salvation and spiritual freedom for all of the nations who call upon God.

These Judaizers were also often well educated men, steeped in tradition, who consequently were able to "bewitch"³² the newly converted. For, the newly converted had such a desire to follow

³¹Ibid., p. 245.

³²Reference to the Epistle to the Galatians, chapter 3, verse 1 (NASV).

God with full zeal, to live in total righteousness, and the will to do anything. These traditionalists gave the impression of erudition, heritage, status, and rock-solidness. But more often, than not, these were men who kept the freedom of the Spirit in fetters. They had only inherited the wealth of the heritage which others had fought and died to obtain. They had little understanding of the true riches of the mystery of faith, and actually hid behind the facade of religiosity with all of its ornate complexity and artificialness. They were hypocrites whom the Apostle Paul attempted to unmask in no uncertain terms, just as Christ and all of the other prophets before Him had done.

The Evangelical Orthodox Church has--and will continue to have--such enemies. They also will be, in many cases, well-meaning. Many of them will be legitimate Christians, who would make the Church, however, after a different image. God will have to be their ultimate judge. Nevertheless, we must continue in the freedom and faith that God has given us. These Neo-Judaizers must not win the day. Why? Because even though they may be Christians, they will ultimately blunt the gospel of Christ if they alone continue to be heard. The Gospel will no longer be "good news" if one has to be a Greek, or a Russian, or a Syrian first before he or she can be a true Christian, acceptable to all.

Let us speak bluntly for a moment and tell the truth as it is. Stephen Muratore says it potently in a recent editorial in Epiphany Journal:

"'Orthodoxy' and 'canonicity' can, and do, become measures of a kind of party loyalty to one or another church rather than transparent signs of the Truth; and all manner of posturing for party approval moves under the cloak of 'Orthodoxy'.

Patristic fundamentalism is another think barrier. It involves the worship of the words of the Fathers without a feeling for their spirit. Matters of Transcendent Truth and conscience are reduced to scholarly historical research, mind-deadening formulas and pharisaical legalisms. This attitude takes root in hearts cold and innocent of pastoral concern. We make Orthodoxy its own end: the idol most difficult to knock over. We become its contentious disciples who do not enter the door in which we stand, blocking others, for within we would ourselves be dismembered by Sacred Tradition. We finally come to feel justified in 'dogmatizing' our own opinions and so are left in the end bereft of even the shell of the Truth to which we were fastened.

The comfort received from party loyalty and patristic fundamentalism is a counterfeit of the bestowed by the Holy Spirit upon the pure in heart."³³

The pill of "dead letter" Orthodoxy, when swallowed, kills the conscience. It quenches spiritual hunger, not with the food of real knowledge but with a placebo: the sense of "belonging" of "being accepted" of "having found one's place". Again, as Stephen Muratore says, this pill of pharisaical "Orthodoxy" ends the spiritual striving of those who were previously zealous in their pursuit of God.

"It gives them confidence that they have found the Answer and so keeps them from being transformed by It. It unites people at the level of mental assent to correct belief and conforming to established patterns of behavior, and forever seals off entry into the oneness of soul which is the true unity of the Church. Those who fear false ecumenism should beware mergers between churches but it will bestow the luster to parishes which are spiritually empty if not altogether dead."³⁴

How should we answer the Neo-Judaizers when we are confronted by their claims? Permit me to answer in words parallel to those of St. Paul in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Romans:³⁵

"But if you bear the name 'Orthodox', and rely upon your canonical standing, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the canonical legislation of the Church; and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are

³³ Stephen Muratore; Epiphany Journal, "From the Editor:" (San Francisco, CA: Epiphany Press, 1987); Vol. 7, Nos. 3-4, p. 2.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ These following paragraphs are a parallel transliteration of the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 2, verses 17-29 (NASV) in order to make it more clearly address the ecclesiological apologetic of this treatise. An orally rendered transliteration of this passage was first used by the now Rev. Peter E. Gillquist, a former bishop of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, at a teaching conference at Holy Trinity Parish in Indianapolis, IN. Later a written rendition was submitted to the Holy Synod's bishops by the author of this treatise prior to the reorganization of the Holy Synod of the Evangelical Orthodox Church in July of 1986.

in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature; having in the canonical tradition the embodiment of knowledge and the truth; you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not have more than one bishop in one city, do you practice this? You who say that a bishop cannot exist apart from a full worshipping church, over which he presides and is the head, do you practice this? You who say that the bishop must be the head of the eucharistic assembly when it gathers, do you practice this? You who boast in the canons, through your breaking of the canons, do you dishonor God and His Church? For the name of Orthodoxy is blasphemed in many parts of the world because of you.

Indeed canonical succession is of value, if you practice the canons; but if you are a transgressor of the canons, your canonical succession has become uncanonical succession. If therefore the church communion without apostolic succession keeps the requirements of the Orthodox faith, will not their unapostolic succession be regarded as apostolic succession? And will not he, who is physically without the succession which comes from the laying on of hands; if he keeps the Orthodox faith, will he not judge you, who through having the letter of the canons and apostolic succession are a transgressor of those very canons?

For he is not Orthodox who is one outwardly; neither is apostolic succession that which is imparted by the flesh. But he is Orthodox who is one inwardly; and apostolic succession is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."

And what shall we say to those who become bewitched by these Neo-Judaizers, and begin to trade the freedom of Christ for the letter of the law? Again, permit me to make a statement parallel to the one that St. Paul makes in his Epistle to the Galatians:36

"You foolish new Orthodox, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified and resurrected in the eucharist? This is the one thing that I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Orthodox canons, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of canonical legislation and succession, or by hearing with faith? Even so

³⁶The following paragraphs are a parallel transliteration of the Epistle to the Galatians, chapter 3, verses 1-9 (NASV). The transliteration is an attempt to bring the spiritual truth behind this passage written by St. Paul into the context of this apologetic treatise on proper Orthodox ecclesiology.

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer."

Nothing has changed since the days of Abraham in regard to the necessity of faith. The canons of the Church have their place. Apostolic succession has its place. But all are only witnesses to what is of first priority: genuine faith, which is from God! Mere canons cannot produce faith. Mere birth into the Orthodox Church with its apostolic succession cannot produce faith. Many children of Orthodox homes grow up and leave the church of their parents, never having embraced the faith. Why? Because growing up with apostolic succession is not a guarantor that you will find the Faith. Faith is a "mystery". It cannot be surrounded and absolutely protected by laws. For faith to be vital and alive in one's heart, it must be embraced by one's whole being.

However, and this is important, faith can and ought to produce eventual recognition by the Church which truly succeeds from the apostles; and can produce or amend the canonical legislation that rightly incorporates this faith. For faith is recognition from God and flows from His divine energies. It will accomplish that for which it was given! True faith can certainly recognize true faith. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann says:

"The Church recognizes only unity and therefore cannot recognize any 'union'. The latter implies a lack of confidence in unity, a denial of the unifying fire of grace which can make all that is 'natural'--all historical insults, limitations, gulfs, and misunderstandings--nonexistent, and can overcome them by force of the divine power."³⁷

May the day come when the canonical Orthodox Church will find a way to embrace as their brethren, "the new Gentiles", if you will so permit the expression. How could such an unbelievable thing happen? Stephen Muratore makes a suggestion which perhaps points in the right direction:

"A forum for genuine Orthodox discussion may help to re-open the door between right belief and direct perception of the Truth. It might be an open space in which the true faith could be confessed from a variety of viewpoints without concern for vested interests,

³⁷Op. cit.; Alexander Schmemmann, p. 254.

party sensitivities or church politics. Such a forum would be a place where we can strive together to have our thoughts dwell in divine truths, a place where we can encourage and cajole one another to come to the living knowledge that lies invisibly at the axis of the corridors of dogma, liturgy, spiritual practice and ministry. Here, our differences could help us overcome our self-righteousness.

If such a forum is to bear fruit, certain aims and attitudes will be necessary. If you enter thinking you are 'of Cephass' you will have to muster respect, then love, for those you consider 'of Paul', (I Cor. 1:12) and for those 'of Greece' if you think you are 'of Russia' and for those 'not of this fold' (Jn. 10:16) if you think your jurisdiction is the only one valid. Our confessions must be faithful and confident, but we must be humble and always ready to repent of error. Participation in such a forum would consist as much in hearing out other viewpoints as in fervently proclaiming our own. It would require unseen warfare against the passions that beset educators and evangelists: the heart would have to be guarded against vanity, anger, calumny and judgment of others. Participants would have to learn to bite their tongues, or their pens, for the salvation of their souls.

Of great importance also would be our reverence for patristic writings. These should not be used as 'proof texts' for our favored opinions....

Who will enter the deep waters of Christianity? Who will sacrifice prejudices and religiously-held opinions to more deeply enter the catholic consciousness of the Church: to become more thoroughly saturated with the mind of the Fathers? Who will risk their reputations or the political and psychological comforts of holding the 'correct' opinions in order to enter '...the close-knit spiritual union of all who truly believe in Christ....'"³⁸

May the Evangelical Orthodox Church be recognized as having a living tradition begun in faith, a living ecclesiology born of the prayers and witness of the Fathers. May it be the house of God incarnated, and men "in-godded", the place where the eternal shapes the temporal. May it overcome the canonical problems that surround it, along with its enemies. May it help restore the Orthodox Church to the "exactness" of the image of Christ. May

³⁸Op. cit.; Stephen Muratore, pp. 2-3.

it find radical faith with all courage and patience. And, may it find the power of the resurrection in Christ. For, Christ is risen indeed!

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