

The mind of the Orthodox Church

Extract from the 'Preface to the second edition in English'

The subject of the Church is always timely, especially in our day. It includes the issues of what the Church is, what is meant by the mind of the Church, who are the members of the Church and how they ought to live within it.

It should, of course, be noted, that in Orthodox dogmatic teaching Ecclesiology is inseparable from Christology, as the Son and Word of God became man, and by His incarnation “He took flesh of the Church” and made it His Body. The unincarnate Word, Who appeared to the Prophets and the righteous of the Old Testament, became incarnate in the New Testament.

Christ, therefore, according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, is the Head of the Church, and the Church is the Body of Christ. And since the Son and Word of God is “One of the Holy Trinity”, Triadology, Christology and Ecclesiology are closely interconnected...

May Christ, Who is the Head of the Church, keep us united with Him, in His Body, and may He count us worthy to acquire the mind of the Church, which is most essential for us nowadays, when confusion and syncretism prevail.

Extract from: 'Origin and revelation of the Church'

Through the centuries there have appeared many heretical teachings which distorted the revealed truth, and which the holy Fathers confronted “with the sling of the Spirit”, that is to say, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because the holy Fathers were the bearers of the unadulterated tradition of the Church...

The question being asked is whether there are heresies

today as well. The answer is not hard to find, because all of us have become witnesses to the fact that there are indeed heretics now, descendants of the great heretics, and heretical teachings are being expressed, perhaps not deliberately, by some who believe, among other things, that they are really members of the Church of Christ. And indeed all of us in our ignorance and lack of learning may have some erroneous views about God and the way of salvation, but we must struggle never to become heresiarchs or descendants of the great heretics who have appeared in the history of the Church...

All heresies distort ecclesiology as well. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, every alteration in the teaching about Christ, about the Holy Spirit and about the way to man's salvation also has ecclesiological consequences.

It could be said that, if there is a major heresy today, it is the so-called ecclesiological heresy. And this should be confronted by the bishops of the Church. There is great confusion today about what the Church is and who are its true members. We confuse or identify the Church with other human traditions. We think that the Church is fragmented and divided, and furthermore, we are ignorant of the Church's way of salvation. So there is confusion about this important matter.

In the chapters to follow we shall attempt to examine the subject of the Church from different angles, and we shall try to see what the holy Fathers say about the Church. I think that this will help us to acquire the genuine mind of the Orthodox Church, which is essential for our salvation.

Extract from the 'Synodikon of Orthodoxy'

In the foregoing chapters we explained in brief who are the true members of the Church, who are the living and who the

dead members of the Church. So we can say that the mind of the Church is expressed by its deified saints. Therefore, finally, all the Ecumenical Councils rest upon the teaching of the saints of the past...

Here I want only to mention Georges Florovsky's opinion that "Catholic experience can be expressed even by the few, even by single confessors of faith; and this is quite sufficient... The sacred dignity of the Council lies not in the number of members representing their Churches. A large 'general' council may prove itself to be a 'council of robbers' (latrocinium), or even of apostates... But it may so happen that during the council the truth will be expressed by the minority. And what is still more important, the truth may be revealed even without a council. The opinions of the Fathers and of the ecumenical Doctors of the Church frequently have greater spiritual value and finality than the definitions of certain councils. And these opinions do not need to be verified and accepted by 'universal consent'."

I would also like to mention the opinion of Fr. John Romanides, that all the holy Fathers followed the same method and had personal experience of the truths of the faith. Their meeting in an Ecumenical Council gave them the opportunity to agree on the same terminology for the same revealed experience. He writes characteristically:

"Neither illumination nor glorification can be institutionalised. The identity of this experience of illumination and glorification among those having the gifts of grace, who have these states, does not necessarily require sameness of dogmatic expression, especially when those gifted are geographically far apart over long periods of time. In any case, when they meet they easily agree about the same form of dogmatic formulation of their identical experiences. A great impetus to-

wards identical dogmatic expression was given at the time when Christianity became an official religion of the Roman Empire and satisfied the Empire's need to distinguish the genuine healers from the pseudophysicians, in the same way in which the governing officials are responsible for distinguishing genuine members of the medical profession from the quacks and embezzlers of medical science, for the protection of their citizens."

With these basic preconditions the Ecumenical Councils are unerring and express the consciousness and the life of the Church. And of course the dogmatic definitions of the Ecumenical Councils have value, because, on the one hand, they assure the possibility of salvation, and, on the other hand, they indicate the true way for people to be cured, so that they can reach deification. Thus the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils are not philosophical, nor do they serve philosophy, but they are theological, that is to say, therapeutic, and they aim at the cure of man. Therefore we owe great thanks to the Fathers who formed the Ecumenical Councils and acted as living ecclesiastic organisms...

Anyone who studies the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* will surely observe, when he comes to the chapters that refer to the heresy of Barlaam and Akindynos, that this phrase occurs six times: "in accordance with the divinely inspired theologies of the saints and the devout mind of the Church". And indeed he will observe that the Council uses the same phrase in opposing all the heretical views of Barlaam and Akindynos and in referring to the teaching of the Church on this particular subject. The heretics are condemned because they do not believe and do not confess "in accordance with the divinely inspired theologies of the saints and the devout mind of the Church".

We must notice that the professions of the saints are

characterised as inspired by God. And of course divine inspiration is linked with revelation. The saints experienced God, they attained experience of divine grace, they knew God personally, they reached Pentecost, they received the revelation, and therefore they are characterised as divinely inspired and unerring teachers of the Church.

We should underline particularly the method which they used and the way they lived in order to become divinely inspired by grace. This way is hesychasm, which is made explicit in the three stages of spiritual perfection: purification of the heart, illumination of the nous and deification. These deified and divinely inspired saints are the Prophets in the Old Testament, the Apostles and the holy Fathers. Therefore the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* says: “As the Prophets saw, as the Apostles taught, as the Church has received, as the teachers expressed in dogmas, as the whole world has agreed, as grace has illumined.” So there is identity of what has been experienced by all the saints, precisely because they followed the same method, they experienced the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, which is our flight from sin, the flight of sin from within us, and the ascent to theoria of God.

Furthermore, the divinely inspired teaching of the saints is closely connected with the devout mind of the Church. The Church produces the saints and the saints express the devout mind of the Church. Saints are inconceivable apart from the Church, and it is unthinkable that saints would have heretical and erroneous views on serious theological questions.

In the Church, as St Gregory Palamas says, there are “those initiated by experience” and those who follow and revere those who are experienced. Thus if we do not have our own experience on these matters, we must nevertheless follow the teaching

of those who see God, the deified and experienced saints. It is only in this way that we have the mind of the Church and the consciousness of the Church. Otherwise we open the path to self-destruction. We must constantly believe and confess “in accordance with the divinely inspired theologies of the saints and the devout mind of the Church.”

The *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* is an excellent and very concise text which sums up the whole Orthodox teaching of our Church. This is why the Church has inserted it into its worship on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and it is read in an attitude of attention and prayer. It is a holy text. And we must harmonise with it all our thinking, and above all, our life.

We need to study it closely in order to recognise what constitutes the Orthodox faith and Orthodox life. And in fact the Orthodox way of life is free from scholasticism and moralism. It is hesychastic and theological.

Our positive or negative stand towards this text shows to what extent we are animated by the Orthodox mind of the Church or are possessed by scholasticism. We are of the Church insofar as we are of the holy Fathers.