

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Catholicity of the Church*

Chapter III of the *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*,
Vol. I: Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View
(Büchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, Europa, 1987), pp. 37-55.

The Theanthropic Union and the Church

Christ conquered the world. This victory consist in His having created His own Church. In the midst of the history, He laid the foundations of a “new being.” The Church is Christ’s work on earth; it is the image and abode of his blessed Presence in the world. And on the day of Pentecost The Holy Spirit descended on the Church, which was then represented by the twelve Apostles and those who were with them. He entered into the world in order to abide with us and act more fully than He had ever acted before; “for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”¹ The Holy Spirit descended once and for always. This is a tremendous and unfathomable mystery. He lives and abides ceaselessly in the church. In the Church we receive the Spirit of adoption.² Through reaching towards and accepting the Holy Ghost we become eternally God’s. In the Church our salvation is perfected; the sanctification and transfiguration, the *theosis* of the human race is accomplished.

Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus: [“Outside the Church there is no salvation”]. All the categorical strength and point of this aphorism lies in its tautology. Outside the Church there is no

38

salvation, because *salvation is the Church*. For salvation is the revelation of the way for every one who believes in Christ’s name. This revelation is to be found only in the Church. In the Church, as in the Body of Christ, in its theanthropic organism, the mystery of incarnation, the mystery of the “two natures,” indissolubly united, is continually accomplished. In the Incarnation

* “The Catholicity of the Church” appeared as “Sobornost: The Catholicity of the Church” in *The Church of God*, edited by E. Mascall (London: S.P.C.K., 1934).

¹ (John 7:39)

² Rom. 8:15

of the Word is the fullness of revelation, a revelation not only of God, but also of man. "For the Son of God became the Son of Man," writes St. Irenaeus, "to the end that man too might become the son of God."³ In Christ, as God-Man, the meaning of human existence is not only revealed, but accomplished. In Christ human nature is perfected, it is renewed, rebuilt, created anew. Human destiny reaches its goal, and henceforth human life is, according to the word of the Apostle, "Hid with Christ in God."⁴ In this sense Christ is the "Last Adam,"⁵ a true man. In Him is the measure and limit of human life. He rose "As the first fruits of them that are asleep."⁶ He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God. His Glory is the glory of all human existence. Christ has entered the pre-eternal glory; He has entered it as Man and has called the whole of mankind to abide with Him and in Him. "God, being rich in merry, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, quickened us together with Christ ... and raised us up with Him, and made us to sit with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus."⁷ Therein lies the mystery of the Church as Christ's Body. The Church is fulness, *to plêrôma* that is, *fulfilment*, completion.⁸ In this manner St. John Chrysostom explains the words of the Apostle: "The Church is the fulfilment of Christ in the same manner as the head completes the body and the body is completed by the head. Thus we understand why the Apostle sees that *Christ*, as the Head *needs all His members*. Because if many of us were not, one the hand, one the foot, one yet another member, *His body would not be complete*. Thus His body is formed of all the members. This means, "*That the head will be complete, only when the body is perfect; when we all are most firmly united and strengthened.*"⁹ Bishop Theophanes repeats the expla-

39

nation of Chrysostom: "The Church is the fulfilment of Christ in the same manner as the tree is the fulfilment of the grain. All that is contained in the grain in a condensed manner, receives its full development in the tree... He Himself is complete and all-perfect, but not yet has He drawn mankind to Himself in final completeness. It is only gradually that mankind enters into

³ *Adv. Haer.* 3:10, 2

⁴ Coloss. 3:3.

⁵ 1 Cor. 15:45.

⁶ 1 Cor. 15:45.

⁷ Eph. 2:4-6.

⁸ Eph. 1:23.

⁹ *In Ephes. Hom.* 3, 2 (Migne, P.G. LXII. c. 26)

Communion with Him and so gives a new fulness to His work, which thereby attains its full accomplishment.¹⁰

The Church is completeness itself; it is the continuation and the fulfilment of the theanthropic union. The Church is transfigured and regenerated mankind. The meaning of this regeneration and transfiguration is that in the Church mankind becomes one unity, “in one body.”¹¹ The life of the Church is unity and union. The body is “knit together” and “increaseth.”¹² in unity of Spirit, in unity of love. The realm of the Church is unity. And of course this unity is no outward one, but is inner, intimate, organic. It is the unity of the living body, the unity of the organism. The Church is a unity not only in the sense that it is one and unique; it is a unity, first of all, because its very being consists in reuniting separated and divided mankind. *It is this unity which is the “sobornost” or catholicity of the Church. In the Church humanity passes over into another plane, begins a new manner of existence. A new life becomes possible, a true, whole and complete life, a catholic life, “in the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.”*¹³ A new existence begins, a new principle of life, “Even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us ... that they may be one even as We are one.”¹⁴

This is the mystery of the final reunion in the image of the Unity of the Holy Trinity. It is realized in the life and construction of the Church, it is *the mystery of sobornost, the mystery of catholicity.*

The Inner Quality of Catholicity

The catholicity of the Church is not a quantitative or a geographical conception. It does not at all depend on

40

the world-wide dispersion of the faithful. The universality of the Church is the consequence or the manifestation, but not the cause or the foundation of its catholicity. The world-wide extension or the universality of the Church is only an outward sign, one that is not absolutely necessary. The Church was catholic even when Christian communities were but solitary rare islands in a sea of unbelief and paganism. And the Church will remain catholic even unto the end of time when the mystery of the “falling away” will be revealed, when the Church once more

¹⁰ *Explan. of Ep. to Ephes.* M. 1893, 2. pp. 93-94. For the same point of view, cf. the late Very Rev. J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, pp. 44-45, I. 403; short ed. pp. 57-60

¹¹ Eph. 2:16.

¹² Col 2:19.

¹³ Eph. 4:3.

¹⁴ John 17:21-23.

will dwindle to a “small flock.” “When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?”¹⁵ The Metropolitan Philaret expressed himself very adequately on this point: “If a city or a country falls away from the universal Church, the latter will still remain an integral, imperishable body.”¹⁶ Philaret uses here the word “universal” in the sense of catholicity. The conception of catholicity cannot be measured by its wide-world expansion; universality does not express it exactly. *Katholikê* from *kath’ holou* means, first of all, the inner wholeness and integrity of the Church’s life. We are speaking here of wholeness, not only of communion, and in any case not of a simple empirical communion. *Kath’ holou* is not the same as *kata pantos*; it belongs not to the phenomenal and empirical, but to the noumenal and ontological plane; it describes the very essence, not the external manifestations. We feel this already in the pre-Christian use of these words, beginning from Socrates. If catholicity also means universality, it certainly is not an empirical universality, but an ideal one; the communion of ideas, not of facts, is what it has in view. The first Christians when using the words *Ekklêsia Katholikê* never meant a world-wide Church. This word rather gave prominence to the orthodoxy of the Church, to the truth of the “Great Church,” as contrasted with the spirit of sectarian separatism and particularism; it was the idea of integrity and purity that was expressed. This has been very forcibly stated in the well known words of St. Ignatius of Antioch: “Where there is a bishop, let there be the whole multitude; just as where Jesus Christ is, there too is the Catholic Church.”¹⁷ These words express the same idea as does the promise: “Where

41

two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”¹⁸ It is this mystery of gathering together (*mystêrion tês synaxeôs*) that the word catholicity expresses. Later on St. Cyril of Jerusalem explained the word “catholicity” which is used in the Creed in the traditional manner of his Church. The word “Church” means the “gathering together of all in one union;” therefore it is called a “gathering” (*ekklêsia*). The Church is called catholic, because it spreads over all the universe and subjects the whole of the human race to righteousness, because also in the Church the dogmas are taught “fully, without any omission, catholically, and completely” (*katholikôs kai anelleipôs*) because, again, in the Church every kind of sin is cured and healed.”¹⁹ Here again catholicity is understood as an inner quality. Only in the West, during the struggle against the Donatists was the word “catholica” used in the sense of “universality,” in

¹⁵ Luke 18:8.

¹⁶ *Opinions and Statements of Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow, Concerning the Orthodox Church in the East* (St. Petersburg, 1886) p. 53.

¹⁷ Ignat. *Smyrn.* 8:2.

¹⁸ Ignat *Smyrn.* 8:2.

¹⁹ Catech. 18:23 (Migne P.G. XXXIII c. 1044).

opposition to the geographical provincialism of the Donatists.²⁰ Later on, in the East, the word “catholic” was understood as synonymous with “ecumenical.” But this only limited the conception, making it less vivid, because it drew attention to the outward form, not to the inner contents. Yet the Church is not catholic because of its outward extent, or, at any rate, not only because of that. The Church is catholic, not only because it is an all-embracing entity, not only because it unites all its members, all local Churches, but because it is catholic all through, in its very smallest part, in every act and event of its life. The *nature* of the Church is catholic; the very web of the Church’s body is catholic. The Church is catholic, because it is the one Body of Christ; it is union in Christ, oneness in the Holy Ghost-and this unity is the highest wholeness and fulness. The gauge of catholic union is that “The multitude of them that believed be of one heart and of one soul.”²¹ Where this is not the case, the life of the Church is limited and restricted. The ontological blending of persons is, and must be, accomplished in oneness with the Body of Christ; they cease to be exclusive and impenetrable. The cold separation into “mine” and “thine” disappears.

The growth of the Church is in the perfecting of its inner

42

wholeness, its inner catholicity, in the “perfection of wholeness”; “That they may be made perfect in one.”²²

The Transfiguration of Personality

The catholicity of the Church has two sides. *Objectively*, the catholicity of the Church denotes a unity of the Spirit. “In one Spirit were we all baptized into one body.”²³ And the Holy Spirit which

²⁰ Cf. Pierre Batiffol, *Le Catholicisme de St. Augustin*, I. (Paris, 1920), p. 212-- “Rappelons que le nom ‘catholique’ a servi à qualifier la Grande Eglise par opposition aux hérétiques... Le nom est vraisemblablement de creation populaire et apparait en Orient au second siècle. Les tractatores du IV. siècle, qui lui cherchent une signification étymologique et savante, veulent y voir l’expressin soit de la perfection intégrale de la foi de l’Eglise, soit du fait que l’Eglise ne fait pas acception de personnes de rang, du culture, soit enfin et surtout de fait que l’Eglise est repandue dans le monde entire d’une extrémité à l’autre. Augustin ne veut connaître que ce dernier sens.” Cp. Also Bishop Lightfoot, in his edition of *St. Ignatius*, v. II (London, 1889), p. 319. *Note ad Loc.*

The history of the Christian and pre-Christian use of the terms *ekklisia katholikí* P.121) and *ekklésia katholiké* and *katholikos* generally in various settings deserves careful study; apparently there have been no special investigations on the subject. In Russian, reference may be made to the very valuable, though not exhaustive or faultless, article of the late Professor M. D. Muretov in the supplement to his book *Ancient Jewish Prayers Ascribed to St. Peter* (Sergiev Posad, 1905). See also Bishop Lightfoot, *St. Ignatius*, v. II (London, 1889), p. 310 (note).

²¹ Act 4:32.

²² John 17:23.

is a Spirit of love and peace, not only unites isolated individuals, but also becomes in every separate soul the source of inner peace and wholeness. Subjectively, the catholicity of the Church means that the Church is a certain unity of life, a brotherhood or communion, a union of love, “a life in common.” The image of the Body is the commandment of love. “St. Paul demands such love of us, a love which should bind us one to the other, *so that we no more should be separated one from the other*;... St. Paul demands that our union should be as perfect as is that of the members of one body”.²⁴ The novelty of the Christian commandment of love consists in the fact that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is more than putting him on the same level with ourselves, of identifying him with ourselves; it means seeing our own self in another, in the beloved one, not in our own self.... Therein lies the limit of love; the beloved is our “alter ego,” an “ego” which is dearer to us than ourself. In love we are merged into one. “The quality of love is such that the loving and the beloved are no more two but one man”.²⁵ Even more: true Christian love sees in every one of our brethren “Christ Himself.” Such love demands self-surrender, self-mastery. Such love is possible only in a catholic expansion and transfiguration of the soul. The commandment to be catholic is given to every Christian. The measure of his spiritual manhood is the measure of his catholicity. The Church is catholic in every one of its members, because a catholic whole cannot be built up or composed otherwise than through the catholicity of its members. No multitude, every member of which is isolated and impenetrable, can become a brotherhood. Union can become possible only through the mutual brotherly love of all the separate

43

brethren. This thought is expressed very vividly in the well known vision of the Church as of a tower that is being built. (Compare the *Shepherd of Hermas*). This tower is being built out of separate stones—the faithful. These faithful are “living stones”.²⁶ In the process of building they fit one into the other, because they are smooth and are well adapted to one another; they join so closely to one another, that their edges are no longer visible, and the tower appears to be built of one stone. This is a symbol of unity and wholeness. But notice, only smooth square stones could be used for this building. There were other stones, bright stones, but round ones, and they were of no use for the building; they did not fit one into the other, were not suitable for the building—*mê harmozontes*— and they had to be placed near the walls.²⁷ In ancient symbolism

²³ 1 Cor. 12:13.

²⁴ St. John Chrysostom, In Eph. Hom. 11.1, Migne, P.G. Ixii, c. 79.

²⁵ In 1 Cor. Hom. 33, 3, Migne, P.G. Ixi. C. 280.

²⁶ 1 Peter 2:5.

²⁷ *Hermas* Vis. III.2.6.8.

“roundness” was a sign of isolation, of self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction— *teres atque rotundus*. And it is just this spirit of self-satisfaction which hinders our entering the Church. The stone must first be made smooth, so that it can fit into the Church wall. We must “reject ourselves” to be able to enter the catholicity of the Church. We must master our self-love in a catholic spirit before we can enter the Church. And in the fulness of the communion of the Church the *catholic transfiguration of personality is accomplished*.

But the rejection and denial of our own self does not signify that personality must be extinguished, that it must be dissolved within the multitude. Catholicity is not corporality or collectivism. On the contrary, *self-denial widens the scope of our own personality; in self-denial we possess the multitude within our own self; we enclose the many within our own ego. Therein lies the similarity with the Divine Oneness of the Holy Trinity*. In its catholicity the Church becomes the created similitude of Divine perfection. The Fathers of the Church have spoken of this with great depth. In the East St. Cyril of Alexandria; in the West St. Hilary.²⁸ In contemporary Russian theology the Metropolitan Antony has said very adequately, “The existence of the Church can be compared to nothing else upon earth, for on earth there is no unity, but only separation. Only in heaven is there anything

44

like it. The Church is a perfect, a new, a peculiar, a unique existence upon earth, an *unicum*, which cannot be closely defined by any conception taken from the life of the world. The Church is the likeness of the existence of the Holy Trinity, a likeness in which many become one. Why is it that this existence, just as the existence of the Holy Trinity, is new for the old man and unfathomable for him? Because personality in its carnal consciousness is a self-imprisoned existence, radically contrasted with every other personality.²⁹ “Thus the Christian must *in the measure of his spiritual development* set himself free, making a direct contrast between the ‘ego’ and the ‘non-ego’ he must *radically modify the fundamental qualities of human self-consciousness*”.³⁰ It is just in this change that the catholic regeneration of the mind consists.

There are two types of self-consciousness and self-assertion: *separate individualism* and *catholicity*. Catholicity is no denial of personality and catholic consciousness is neither generic nor racial. It is not a common consciousness, neither is it the joint consciousness of the many or the *Bewusstsein überhaupt* of German philosophers. Catholicity is achieved not by eliminating

²⁸ For Patristic quotations very well arranged and explained, see E. Mersch, J.J., *Le Corps Mystique du Christ, Etudes de Théologie Historique*, t. I-II (Louvain, 1933).

²⁹ Archbishop Anthony Khapovitsky, *The Moral Idea of the Dogma of the Church, Works*, vol. 2, pp. 17-18. St. Petersburg, 1911.

³⁰ *The Moral Idea of the Dogma of the Holy Trinity*, p. 65.

the living personality, nor by passing over into the plane of an abstract Logos. *Catholicity is a concrete oneness in thought and feeling.* Catholicity is the style or the order or the setting of *personal* consciousness, which rises to the “level of catholicity.” It is the “telos” of personal consciousness, which is realized in creative development, not in the annihilation of personality.

In catholic transfiguration personality receives strength and power to express the life and consciousness of the whole. And this not as an impersonal medium, but in creative and heroic action. We must not say: “Every one in the Church *attains* the level of catholicity,” but “*every one can, and must, and is called to attain it.*” Not always and not by every one is it attained. In the Church we call those who have attained it Doctors and Fathers, because from them we hear not only their personal profession, but also the testimony of the Church; they speak to us from its catholic completeness, from the completeness of a life full of grace.

45

The Sacred and the Historical

The Church is the unity of charismatic life. The source of this unity is hidden in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and in the sacrament of Pentecost, that unique descent of the Spirit of Truth into the world. Therefore the Church is an *apostolic Church*. It was created and sealed by the Spirit in the Twelve Apostles, and the Apostolic Succession is a living and mysterious thread binding the whole historical fulness of Church life into one catholic whole. Here again we see two sides. The objective side is the uninterrupted sacramental succession, the continuity of the hierarchy. The Holy Ghost does not descend upon earth again and again, but abides in the “visible” and historical Church. And it is in the Church that He breathes and sends forth His rays. Therein lies the fulness and catholicity of Pentecost.

The subjective side is loyalty to the Apostolic tradition; a life spent according to this tradition, as in a living realm of truth. This is the fundamental demand or postulate of Orthodox thought, and here again this demand entails the denial of individualistic separatism; it insists on catholicity. The catholic nature of the Church is seen most vividly in the fact that the experience of the Church belongs to all times. In the life and existence of the Church time is mysteriously overcome and mastered, time, so to speak, *stands still*. It stands still not only because of the power of historical memory, or of imagination, which can “fly over the double barrier of time and space;” it stands still, because of the power of grace, which gathers together in catholic unity of life that which had become separated by walls built in the course of time. Unity in the Spirit embraces in a mysterious, time-conquering fashion, the faithful of all generations. This time-conquering unity is manifested and revealed in the experience of the Church, especially in its Eucharistic experience. The Church is the living image of eternity within time. The experience and life of the Church are not interrupted or broken up by time. This, too, is not only because of

continuity in the super-personal outpouring of grace, but also because of the catholic inclusion of all that was, into the

46

mysterious fulness of the present. Therefore the history of the Church gives us not only successive changes, but also identity. In this sense communion with the saints is a *communio sanctorum* ["communion of the saints"]. The Church knows that it is a unity of all times, and as such it builds up its life. Therefore the Church thinks of the past not as of something that is no more, but as of something that has been accomplished, as something existing in the catholic fulness of the one Body of Christ. Tradition reflects this victory over time. To learn from tradition, or, still better, *in tradition*, is to learn from the fulness of this time-conquering experience of the Church, an experience which every member of the Church may learn to know and possess according to the measure of his spiritual manhood; according to the measure of his catholic development. It means that we can learn from history as we can from revelation. Loyalty to tradition does not mean loyalty to bygone times and to outward authority; it is a living connection with the fulness of Church experience. Reference to tradition is no historical inquiry. Tradition is not limited to Church archaeology. Tradition is no outward testimony which can be accepted by an outsider. The Church alone is the living witness of tradition; and only from inside, from within the Church, can tradition be felt and accepted as a certainty. Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit's unceasing revelation and preaching of good tidings. For the living members of the Church it is no outward historical authority, but the eternal, continual voice of God - not only the voice of the past, but the voice of eternity. Faith seeks its foundations not merely in the example and bequest of the past, but in the grace of the Holy Ghost, witnessing always, now and ever, world without end.

As Khomyakov admirably puts it, "Neither individuals, nor a multitude of individuals within the Church preserve tradition or write the Scriptures, but the Spirit of God which lives in the whole body of the Church".³¹ "Concord with the past" is only the consequence of loyalty to the whole; it is simply the expression of the constancy of catholic experience in the midst of shifting times. To accept and understand tradition we must live within the Church, we must be con-

47

scious of the grace-giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy Ghost in it. We may truly say that when we accept tradition we accept, through faith, our Lord, who abides in the midst of the faithful; for the Church is His Body, which cannot be separated from Him. That is why loyalty to tradition means not only *concord* with the past, but, in a certain sense, *freedom from the past*, as from some outward formal criterion. Tradition is not only a

³¹ *Russia and the English Church*, p. 198.

protective, conservative principle; it is, primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration. Tradition is not a principle striving to restore the past, using the past as a criterion for the present. Such a conception of tradition is rejected by history itself and by the consciousness of the Church. Tradition is authority to teach, *potestas magisterii*, authority to hear witness to the truth. The Church bears witness to the truth not by reminiscence or from the words of others, but from its own living, unceasing experience, from its catholic fulness ... Therein consists that “tradition of truth,” *traditio veritatis*, about which St. Irenaeus spoke.³² For him it is connected with the “veritable unction of truth,” *charisma veritatis certum*,³³ and the “teaching of the Apostles” was for him not so much an unchangeable example to be repeated or imitated, as an eternally living and inexhaustible source of life and inspiration. Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a *charismatic*, not a historical, principle.

It is quite false to limit the “sources of teaching” to Scripture and tradition, and to separate tradition from Scripture as only an oral testimony or teaching of the Apostles. In the first place, both Scripture and tradition were given only within the Church. Only in the Church have they been received in the fulness of their sacred value and meaning. In them is contained the truth of Divine Revelation, a truth which lives in the Church. This experience of the Church has not been exhausted either in Scripture or in tradition; it is only reflected in them. Therefore, only within the Church does Scripture live and become vivified, only within the Church is it revealed as a whole and not broken up into separate texts, commandments, and aphorisms. This means

48

that Scripture has been given in tradition, but not in the sense that it can be understood only according to the dictates of tradition, or that it is the written record of historical tradition or oral teaching. Scripture needs to be explained. It is revealed in theology. This is possible only through the medium of the living experience of the Church.

We cannot assert that Scripture is self-sufficient; and this not because it is incomplete, or inexact, or has any defects, but because Scripture in its very essence does not lay claim to self-sufficiency. We can say that Scripture is a God-inspired scheme or image (*eikôn*) of truth, but not truth itself. Strange to say, we often limit the freedom of the Church as a whole, for the sake of furthering the freedom of individual Christians. In the name of individual freedom the Catholic, ecumenical freedom of the Church is denied and limited. The liberty of the Church is shackled by an abstract biblical standard for the sake of setting free individual consciousness from the spiritual demands enforced by the experience of the Church. This is a denial of catholicity, a

³² *Adv. Haer.* i. 10, 2.

³³ *Ibid.* 4. 26,2.

destruction of catholic consciousness; this is the sin of the Reformation. Dean Inge neatly says of the Reformers: "their creed has been described as a return to the Gospel in the spirit of the Koran".³⁴ If we declare Scripture to be self-sufficient, we only expose it to subjective, arbitrary interpretation, thus cutting it away from its sacred source. Scripture is given to us in tradition. It is the vital, crystallizing centre. The Church, as the Body of Christ, stands mystically first and is fuller than Scripture. This does not limit Scripture, or cast shadows on it. But truth is revealed to us not only historically. Christ appeared and still appears before us not only in the Scriptures; He unchangeably and unceasingly reveals Himself in the Church, in His own Body. In the times of the early Christians the Gospels were not yet written and could not be the sole source of knowledge. The Church acted according to the spirit of the Gospel, and, what is more, the Gospel came to life in the Church, in the Holy Eucharist. In the Christ of the Eucharist Christians learned to know the Christ of the Gospels, and so His image became vivid to them.

This does not mean that we oppose Scripture to experi-

49

ence. On the contrary, it means that we unite them in the same manner in which they were united from the beginning. We must not think that all we have said denies history. On the contrary, history is recognized in all its sacred realism. As contrasted with outward historical testimony, we put forward no subjective religious experience, no solitary mystical consciousness, not the experience of separate believers, but the integral, living experience of the Catholic Church, catholic experience, and Church life. And this experience includes also historical memory; it is full of history. But this memory is not only a reminiscence and a remembrance of some bygone events. Rather it is a vision of what is, and of what has been, accomplished, a vision of the mystical conquest of time, of the catholicity of the whole of time. The Church knows naught of forgetfulness. The grace-giving experience of the Church becomes integral in its catholic fulness.

This experience has not been exhausted either in Scripture, or in oral tradition, or in definitions. *It cannot, it must not be, exhausted.* On the contrary, all words and images must be regenerated in its experience, not in the psychologisms of subjective feeling, but in experience of spiritual life. This experience is the source of the teaching of the Church. However, not everything within the Church dates from Apostolic times. This does not mean that something has been revealed which was "unknown" to the Apostles; nor does it mean that what is of later date is less important and convincing. Everything was given and revealed fully from the beginning. On the day of Pentecost Revelation was completed, and will admit of no further completion till the Day of judgment and its last fulfilment. Revelation has not been widened, and even knowledge has

³⁴ Very Rev. W. R. Inge, *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought*, 1926, p. 27.

not increased. The Church knows Christ now no more than it knew Him at the time of the Apostles. *But it testifies of greater things.* In its definitions it always unchangeably describes the same thing, but in the unchanged image ever new features become visible. But it knows the truth not less and not otherwise than it knew it in time of old. The identity of experience is loyalty to tradition. Loyalty to tradition did not prevent the Fathers of the Church from “creating new names” (as St. Gregory Nazianzen says) when

50

it was necessary for the protection of the unchangeable faith. All that was said later on, was said from catholic completeness and is of equal value and force with that which was pronounced in the beginning. And even now the experience of the Church has not been exhausted, but protected and fixed in dogma. But there is much of which the Church testifies not in a dogmatic, but in a liturgical, manner, in the symbolism of the sacramental ritual, in the imagery of prayers, and in the established yearly round of commemorations and festivals. Liturgical testimony is as valid as dogmatic testimony. The concreteness of symbols is sometimes even more vivid, clear, and expressive than any logical conceptions can be, as witness the image of the Lamb taking upon Himself the sins of the world.

Mistaken and untrue is that theological minimalism, which wants to choose and set apart the “most important, most certain, and most binding” of all the experiences and teachings of the Church. This is a false path, and a false statement of the question. Of course, not everything in the historical institutions of the Church is equally important and venerable; not everything in the empirical actions of the Church has even been sanctioned. There is much that is only historical. However, we have no outward criterion to discriminate between the two. The methods of outward historical criticism are inadequate and insufficient. Only from within the Church can we discern the *sacred* from the *historical*. From within we see what is catholic and belongs to all time, and what is only “theological opinion,” or even a simple casual historical accident. Most important in the life of the Church is its fulness, its catholic integrity. There is more freedom in this fulness than in the formal definitions of an enforced minimum, in which we lose what is most important—directness, integrity, catholicity.

One of the Russian Church historians gave a very successful definition of the unique character of the Church’s experience. The Church gives us not a system but a key; not a plan of God’s City, but the means of entering it. Perhaps someone will lose his way because he has no plan. But all that he will see, he will see without a mediator, he will see it

51

directly, it will be real for him; while he who has studied only the plan, risks remaining outside and not really finding anything.³⁵

The Inadequacy of the Vincentian Canon

The well known formula of Vincent of Lerins is very inexact, when he describes the catholic nature of Church life in the words, *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*. [“What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all”]. First of all, it is not clear whether this is an empirical criterion or not. If this be so, then the “Vincentian Canon” proves to be inapplicable and quite false. For about what *omnes* [“all”] is he speaking? Is it a demand for a general, universal questioning of all the faithful, and even of those who only deem themselves such? At any rate, all the weak and poor of faith, all those who doubt and waver, all those who rebel, ought to be excluded. But the Vincentian Canon gives us no criterion, whereby to distinguish and select. Many disputes arise about faith, still more about dogma. How, then, are we to understand *omnes*? Should we not prove ourselves too hasty, if we settled all doubtful points by leaving the decision to “liberty”— *in dubiis libertas* [“in doubtful matters, freedom”]— according to the well known formula wrongly ascribed to St. Augustine. There is actually no need for universal questioning. Very often the measure of truth is the witness of the minority. It may happen that the Catholic Church will find itself but “a little flock.” Perhaps there are more of heterodox than of orthodox mind. It may happen that the heretics spread everywhere, *ubique*, and that the Church is relegated to the background of history, that it will retire into the desert. In history this was more than once the case, and quite possibly it may more than once again be so. Strictly speaking, the Vincentian Canon is something of a tautology. The word *omnes* is to be understood as referring to those that are *orthodox*. In that case the criterion loses its significance. *Idem* [“the same”] is defined *per idem* [“by the same”]. And of what eternity and of what omnipresence does this rule speak? To what do *semper* [“always”] and *ubique* [“everywhere”] relate? Is it the *experience* of faith or the *definitions* of faith that they refer to? In the

52

latter case the canon becomes a dangerous minimising formula. For not one of the dogmatic definitions strictly satisfies the demand of *semper* and *ubique*.

Will it then be necessary to limit ourselves to the dead letter of Apostolic writings? It appears that the Vincentian Canon is a postulate of historical simplification, of a harmful primitivism. This means that we are not to seek for outward, formal criteria of catholicity; we are not to dissect catholicity in empirical universality. Charismatic tradition is truly universal; in its fulness it embraces every kind of *semper* and *ubique* and unites all. But empirically it may not be

³⁵ B.M. Melioransky, “Lectures on the History of Ancient Christian Churches,” *The Pilgrim*, Russian, 1910, 6, p. 931.

accepted by all. At any rate we are not to prove the truth of Christianity by means of “universal consent,” *per consensum omnium*. In general, no *consensus* can prove truth. This would be a case of acute psychologism, and in theology there is even less place for it than in philosophy. On the contrary, truth is the measure by which we can evaluate the worth of “general opinion.” Catholic experience can be expressed even by the few, even by single confessors of faith; and this is quite sufficient. Strictly speaking, to be able to recognize and express catholic truth we need no ecumenical, universal assembly and vote; we even need no “Ecumenical Council.” 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. And the *ecclesia sparsa* [“church dispersed”] often convicts it of its nullity by silent opposition. *Numerus episcoporum* [“number of bishops”] does not solve the question. The historical and practical methods of recognizing sacred and catholic tradition can be many; that of assembling Ecumenical Councils is but one of them, and not the only one. This does not mean that it is unnecessary to convoke councils and conferences. 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.” On

53

the contrary, it is they themselves who are the criterion and they who can prove. It is of this that the Church testifies in silent *receptio*. Decisive value resides in inner catholicity, not in empirical universality. The opinions of the Fathers are accepted, not as a formal subjection to outward authority, but because of the inner evidence of their catholic truth. The whole body of the Church has the right of verifying, or, to be more exact, the right, and not only the right but the duty, of *certifying*. It was in this sense that in the well known Encyclical Letter of 1848 the Eastern Patriarchs wrote that “the people itself” (*laos*), i.e., the Body of the Church, “was the guardian of piety” (*hyperaspistês tês thrêskeias*) And even before this the Metropolitan Philaret said the same thing in his Catechism. In answer to the question. “Does a true treasury of sacred tradition exist?” he says “*All the faithful, united through the sacred tradition of faith, all together and all successively, are built up by God into one Church, which is the true treasury of sacred tradition, or, to quote the words of St. Paul, ‘The Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.’*”³⁶

The conviction of the Orthodox Church that the “guardian” of tradition and piety is *the whole people*, i.e. the Body of Christ, in no wise lessens or limits the power of teaching given to the

³⁶ 1 Tim. 3:15.

hierarchy. It only means that the power of teaching given to the hierarchy is one of the functions of the catholic completeness of the Church; it is the power of testifying, of expressing and speaking the faith and the experience of the Church, which have been preserved in the whole body. The teaching of the hierarchy is, as it were, the mouthpiece of the Church. *De omnium fidelium ore pendeamus, quia in omnem fidelem Spiritus Dei spirat*. [“We depend upon the word of all the faithful, because the Spirit of God breathes in each of the faithful”].³⁷ Only to the hierarchy has it been given to teach “with authority.” The hierarchs have received this power to teach, not from the church-people but from the High Priest, Jesus Christ, in the Sacrament of Orders. But this teaching finds its limits in the expression of the whole Church. The Church is called to witness to this experience, which is an inexhaustible experience, a spiritual vision. A bishop of the Church, *episcopus in ecclesia*, must be a teacher. Only the bishop has received full power and authority to speak in the name of his flock. The latter receives the right of speaking through the bishop. But to do so the bishop must embrace his Church within himself; he must make manifest its experience and its faith. He must speak not from himself, but in the name of the Church, *ex consensu ecclesiae*. This is just the contrary of the Vatican formula: *ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae* [“from himself, but not from the consensus of the Church”].

It is not from his flock that the bishop receives full power to teach, but from Christ through the Apostolic Succession. But full power has been given to him to bear witness to the catholic experience of the body of the Church. He is limited by this experience, and therefore in questions of faith the people must judge concerning his teaching. The duty of obedience ceases when the bishop deviates from the catholic norm, and the people have the right to accuse and even to depose him”.³⁸

Freedom and Authority

In the catholicity of the Church the painful duality and tension between freedom and authority is solved. In the Church there is not and cannot be any outward authority. Authority cannot be a source of spiritual life. So also Christian authority appeals to freedom; this authority must convince, not constrain. Official subjection would in no wise further true unity of mind and of heart. But this does not mean that everyone has received unlimited freedom of personal opinion. It is precisely in the Church that “personal opinions” should not and cannot exist. A double problem is facing every member of the Church. First of all, he must master his

³⁷ St. Paulinus of Nola, *epist.* 23, 25, M.L. 61. col. 281.

³⁸ For some more details cp. My articles: “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation,” *The Christian East*, 5.13, No. 2, 1932 [does not appear to be in Florovsky’s published *Collected Works*], and “The Sacrament of Pentecost,” *The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius*, No 23, March 1934 [see Vol. III of the *Collected Works*].

subjectivity, set himself free from psychological limitations, raise the standard of his consciousness to its full catholic measure. Secondly, he must live in spiritual sympathy with, and understand, the historical completeness of the Church's experience. Christ reveals Himself not to separate individuals, nor is it only their personal fate which He directs.

55

Christ came not to the scattered sheep, but to the whole human race, and His work is being fulfilled in the fulness of history, that is, in the Church.

In a certain sense the whole of history is sacred history. Yet, at the same time, the history of the Church is tragic. Catholicity has been given to the Church; its achievement is the Church's task. Truth is conceived in labour and striving. It is not easy to overcome subjectivity and particularism. The fundamental condition of Christian heroism is humility before God, acceptance of His Revelation. And God has revealed Himself in the Church. This is the final Revelation, which passeth not away. Christ reveals Himself to us not in our isolation, but in our mutual catholicity, in our union. He reveals Himself as the New Adam, as the Head of the Church, the Head of the Body. Therefore, humbly and trustfully we must enter the life of the Church and try to find ourselves in it. We must believe that it is just in the Church that the fulness of Christ is accomplished. Every one of us has to face his own difficulties and doubts. But we believe and hope that in united, catholic, heroic effort and exploits, these difficulties will be solved. Every work of fellowship and of concord is a path towards the realization of the catholic fulness of the Church. And this is pleasing in the sight of the Lord: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."³⁹

³⁹ Mt. 18:20.