

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Limits of the Church

Church Quarterly Review, 1933. The views in this essay were expressed in a similar form seventeen years later, in "The Doctrine of the Church and the Ecumenical Problem," *Ecumenical Review* (1950), 152-161. Downloaded from the WCC web page, "Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC: Background materials for sub-committees III (Orthodox Academy, Crete, August 2000) at wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/crete-01-e.html. This article does not seem to be in Florovsky's *Collected Works*.

From the WCC web page: "Few Orthodox theologians have had such an impact on the ecumenical movement as Fr. Georges Florovsky. At least as remarkable is the fact that few Orthodox theologians other than Fr. Georges have attempted to set out perspectives on the nature of the canonical and sacramental boundaries of the Church. Fr. Georges asserts that the Church's canonical boundaries are not contiguous with her sacramental boundaries, i.e., that sacramental grace exists beyond the canonical limits of the Orthodox Church. He rejects a simple 'economic' explanation, as *oikonomia* cannot create something that did not exist in the first place."

The Limits of the Church

It is very difficult to give an exact and firm definition of a sect or schism (I distinguish the theological definition from the simple canonical description), since a sect in the Church is always something contradictory and unnatural, a paradox and an enigma. For the Church is unity, and the whole of her being is in this unity and union, of Christ and in Christ. For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12.13), and the prototype of this unity is the consubstantial Trinity. The measure of this unity is catholicity or communality (*sobornost*), where the impenetrability of personal consciousness is softened—and even removed—in complete unity of thought and soul, and the multitude of them that believe are of one heart and soul (cf. Acts 4.32). A sect, on the other hand, is separation, solitariness, the loss and denial of communality. The sectarian spirit is the direct opposite of the Church spirit.

The question of the nature and meaning of divisions and sects in the Church was put in all its sharpness as early as the ancient baptismal disputes of the third century. At that time St Cyprian of Carthage developed with fearless consistency a doctrine of the

complete absence of grace in every sect, precisely as a sect. The whole meaning and the whole logical stress of his reasoning lay in the conviction that the sacraments are established in the Church. That is to say, they are effected and can be effected only in the Church, in communion and in communality. Therefore every violation of communality and unity in itself leads immediately beyond the last barrier into some decisive outside. To St Cyprian every schism was a departure out of the Church, out of that sanctified and holy land where alone there rises the baptismal spring, the waters of salvation, *quia una est aqua in ecclesia sancta* (Epist. lxxi, 2).

The teaching of St Cyprian as to the gracelessness of sects is only the opposite side of his teaching about unity and communality. This is not the place or the moment to recollect and relate Cyprian's deductions and proofs. Each of us remembers and knows them, is bound to know them, is bound to remember them. They have not lost their force to this day. The historical influence of Cyprian was continuous and powerful. Strictly speaking, in its theological premises the teaching of St Cyprian has never been disproved. Even Augustine was not very far from Cyprian. He argued with the Donatists, not with Cyprian himself, and did not try to refute Cyprian; indeed, his argument was more about practical measures and conclusions. In his reasoning about the unity of the Church, about the unity of love as a necessary and decisive condition for the saving power of the sacraments, Augustine really only repeats Cyprian in new words.

But the practical conclusions drawn by Cyprian have not been accepted and supported by the consciousness of the Church. One may ask how this was possible, if his premisses have been neither disputed nor set aside. There is no need to enter into the details of the Church's canonical relations with sectarians and heretics; it is an imprecise and an involved enough story. It is sufficient to state that there are occasions when, by her very actions, the Church gives one to understand that the sacraments of sectarians— and even of heretics— are valid, that the sacraments can be celebrated outside the strict canonical limits of the Church. The Church customarily receives adherents from sects— and even from heresies— not by the way of baptism, thereby obviously meaning or supposing that they have already been actually baptized in their sects and heresies. In many cases the Church receives adherents even without chrism, and sometimes also clergy in their existing orders. All the more must this be understood and explained as recognizing the validity or reality of the corresponding rites performed over them outside the Church.

If sacraments are performed, however, it can only be by virtue of the Holy Spirit, and canonical rules thus establish or reveal a certain mystical paradox. In what she does the Church bears witness to the extension of her mystical territory even beyond her canonical borders: the outside world does not begin immediately. St Cyprian was right: The sacraments are accomplished only in the Church. But he defined this in hastily and too narrowly. Must we not rather argue in the opposite direction? Where the sacraments

are accomplished, there is the Church. St Cyprian started from the silent supposition that the canonical and charismatic limits of the Church invariably coincide, and it is his unproven equation that has not been confirmed by the communal consciousness of the Church.

As a mystical organism, as the sacramental Body of Christ, the Church cannot be adequately described in canonical terms or categories alone. It is impossible to state or discern the true limits of the Church simply by canonical signs or marks. Very often the canonical boundary determines the charismatic boundary as well, and what is bound on earth is bound by an indissoluble bond in heaven. But not always. And still more often, not immediately. In her sacramental, mysterious being the Church surpasses all canonical norms. For that reason a canonical cleavage does not immediately signify mystical impoverishment and desolation. All that Cyprian said about the unity of the Church and the sacraments can be and must be accepted. But it is not necessary to draw with him the final boundary around the body of the Church by means of canonical points alone.

This raises a general question and a doubt. Are these canonical rules and acts subject to theological generalization? Is it possible to ascribe to them theological or dogmatic grounds and motivation? Or do they rather represent only pastoral discretion and forbearance? Ought we not to understand the canonical mode of action as a forbearing silence concerning gracelessness rather than as a recognition of the reality or validity of schismatic rites? And if so, is it then quite prudent to cite or introduce canonical facts into a theological argument?

This objection is connected with the theory of what is called economy (*oikonomia*). In general ecclesiastical usage economy is a term of very many meanings. In its broadest sense it embraces and signifies the whole work of salvation (cf. Coloss. 1.25; Eph. 1.10; 3.2, 9). The Vulgate usually translates it by *dispensatio*. In canonical language economy has not become a technical term. It is rather a descriptive word, a kind of general characteristic: economy is opposed to strictness (*akribeia*) as a kind of relaxation of Church discipline, an exemption or exception from the strict rule (*ius strictum*) or from the general rule. The governing motive of economy is precisely philanthropy, pastoral discretion, a pedagogical calculation—the deduction is always from practical utility. Economy is an aspect of pedagogical rather than canonical consciousness. Economy can and should be employed by each individual pastor in his parish, still more by a bishop or council of bishops. For economy is pastorship and pastorship is economy. In this is the whole strength and vitality of the economic principle—and also its limitations. Not every question can be asked and answered in terms of economy.

One must ask, therefore, whether it is possible to treat the question of the baptism of sectarians and heretics as a question only of economy. Certainly, in so far as it is a

question of winning lost souls for Catholic truth, of bringing them to the word of truth, then every course of action must be economic; that is, pastoral, compassionate, loving. The pastor must leave the ninety and nine and seek the lost sheep. But for this very reason the need is all the greater for complete sincerity and directness. Not only is unequivocal accuracy, strictness and clarity— in fact, *akribeia*— required in the sphere of dogma (how otherwise can unity of mind be obtained?), but accuracy and clarity are above all necessary also in mystical diagnosis. Precisely for this reason the question of the rites of sectarians and heretics must be asked and answered in terms of the strictest *akribeia*. For here it is not so much a *quaestio iuris* as a *quaestio facti*, and indeed of mystical fact, of sacramental reality. It is not a matter of recognition so much as of diagnosis; it is necessary to identify and to discern mystical realities.

Least of all is the application of economy to such a question compatible with the radical standpoint of St Cyprian. If beyond the canonical limits of the Church the wilderness without grace begins immediately, if schismatics have not been baptized and still abide in the darkness that precedes baptism, then perfect clarity, strictness, and firmness are even more indispensable in the acts and judgements of the Church. Here no forbearance is appropriate or even possible; no concessions are permissible. Is it in fact conceivable that the Church should receive sectarians or heretics into her own body not by way of baptism simply in order thereby to make their decisive step easy? This would certainly be a very rash and dangerous complaisance. Instead, it would be connivance with human weakness, self-love, and lack of faith, a connivance all the more dangerous in that it creates the appearance of a recognition by the Church that schismatic sacraments and rites are valid, not only in the minds of schismatics or people from outside, but in the consciousness of the majority of people in the Church and even of its leaders.

Moreover, this mode of action is applied because it creates this appearance. If in fact the Church were fully convinced that in the sects and heresies baptism is not accomplished, to what end would she reunite schismatics without baptism? Surely not in order simply to save them by this step from false shame in the open confession that they have not been baptized. Can such a motive be considered honorable, convincing, and of good repute? Can it benefit the newcomers to reunite them through ambiguity and suppression of truth? To the reasonable question whether it would not be possible by analogy to unite Jews and Moslems to the Church by economy and without baptism Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) replied with complete candor: Ah, but all such neophytes— and even those baptized in the name of Montanus and Priscilla— would not themselves claim to enter the Church without immersion and the utterance of the words, In the name of the Father, etc. Such a claim could only be advanced through a confused understanding of the Church's grace by those sectarians and schismatics whose baptism, worship and hierarchical system differ little externally from those of the Church.

It would be very insulting to them, on their turning to the Church, to have to sit on the same seat with heathens and Jews. For that reason the Church, indulging their weakness, has not performed over them the external act of baptism, but has given them this grace in the second sacrament (Faith and Reason, 1916, 8-9, pp.887-8).

From the Metropolitan Anthony's argument common sense would draw precisely the opposite conclusion. In order to lead weak and unreasoning neophytes to the clear understanding of the Church's grace which they lack, it would be all the more necessary and appropriate to perform over them the external act of baptism, instead of giving them, and many others, by a feigned accommodation to their susceptibilities, not only an excuse but a ground to continue deceiving themselves through the equivocal fact that their baptism, worship and hierarchical system differ in little externally from those of the Church.

One may ask who gave the Church this right not merely to change, but simply to abolish the external act of baptism, performing it in such cases only mentally, by implication or by intention at the celebration of the second sacrament (i.e. chrismation) over the unbaptized. Admittedly, in special and exceptional cases the external act, the form, may indeed be abolished; such is the martyrs baptism in blood, or even the so-called *baptisma flaminis*. But this is admissible only in *casu necessitatis*. Moreover, there can hardly be any analogy between these cases and a systematic connivance in another's sensitiveness and self-deception. If economy is pastoral discretion conducive to the advantage and salvation of human souls, then in such a case one could only speak of economy in reverse. It would be a deliberate retrogression into equivocation and obscurity for the sake of purely external success, since the internal enchurchment of ineophytes cannot take place with such concealment. It is scarcely possible to impute to the Church such a perverse and crafty intention. And in any case the practical result of this economy must be considered utterly unexpected. For in the Church herself the conviction has arisen among the majority that sacraments are performed even among schismatics, that even in the sects there is a valid, although forbidden, hierarchy. The true intention of the Church in her acts and rules would appear to be too difficult to discern, and from this point of view as well the economic explanation of these rules cannot be regarded as convincing.

The economic explanation raises even greater difficulties when we consider its general theological premises. One can scarcely ascribe to the Church the power and the right, as it were, to convert the has-not-been into the has-been, to change the meaningless into the valid, as Professor Divoniotis expresses it (*Church Quarterly Review*, No.231 [April 1931], p.97), in the order of economy. This would give a particular sharpness to the question whether it is possible to receive schismatic clergy in their existing orders. In the Russian Church adherents from Roman Catholicism or from the Nestorians, etc., are received into communion through recantation of heresy, that is, through the sacrament

of repentance. Clergy are given absolution by a bishop and thereby, the inhibition lying on a schismatic cleric is removed. One asks whether it is conceivable that in this delivery and absolution from sin there is also accomplished silently— and even secretly— baptism, confirmation, ordination as deacon or priest, sometimes even consecration as bishop, without any form or clear and distinctive external act which might enable us to notice and consider precisely what sacraments are being performed.

Here there is a double equivocation, both from the standpoint of motive and from the standpoint of the fact itself. Can one, in short, celebrate a sacrament by virtue of intention alone and without some visible act? Of course not. Not because there belongs to the form some self-sufficient or magic effect, but precisely because in the celebration of a sacrament the external act and the pouring-forth of grace are in substance indivisible and inseparable. Certainly, the Church is the steward of grace and to her is given power to preserve and teach these gifts of grace. But the power of the Church does not extend to the very foundations of Christian existence. It is impossible to conceive that the Church might have the right, in the order of economy, to admit to the priestly function without ordination the clergy of schismatic confessions, even of those that have not preserved the apostolic succession, while remedying not only all defects but a complete lack of grace while granting power and recognition by means of an unexpressed intention.

In such an interpretation the Church's whole sacramental system becomes too soft and elastic. Khomiakov, too, was not sufficiently careful, when, in defending the new Greek practice of receiving reunited Latins through baptism, he wrote to Palmer that all sacraments are completed only in the bosom of the true Church and it matters not whether they be completed in one form or another. Reconciliation (with the Church) renovates the sacraments or completes them, giving a full and Orthodox meaning to the rite that was before either insufficient or heterodox, and the repetition of the preceding sacraments is virtually contained in the rite or fact of reconciliation. Therefore, the visible repetition of baptism or confirmation, though unnecessary, cannot be considered as erroneous, and establishes only a ritual difference without any difference of opinion (*Russia and the English Church*, ch. vi, p.62). This is impossible. The repetition of a sacrament is not only superfluous but impermissible. If there was no sacrament and what was previously performed was an imperfect, heretical rite, then the sacrament must be accomplished for the first time— and with complete sincerity and candor. In any case, the Catholic sacraments are not just rites and it is not possible to treat the external aspect of a sacramental celebration with such disciplinary relativism.

The economic interpretation of the canons might be probable and convincing, but only in the presence of direct and perfectly clear proofs, whereas it is generally supported by indirect data and most often by indirect intentions and conclusions. The economic interpretation is not the teaching of the Church. It is only a private theological opinion,

very late and very controversial, which arose in a period of theological confusion and decadence in a hasty endeavor to dissociate oneself as sharply as possible from Roman theology.

Roman theology admits and acknowledges that there remains in sects a valid hierarchy and even, in a certain sense, the apostolic succession, so that under certain conditions sacraments may be accomplished— and actually are accomplished— among schismatics and even among heretics. The basic premises of this sacramental theology have already been established with sufficient definition by St Augustine, and the Orthodox theologian has every reason to take the theology of Augustine into account in his doctrinal synthesis.

The first thing to notice in Augustine is the organic way in which he relates the question of the validity of sacraments to the doctrine of the Church. The reality of the sacraments celebrated by schismatics signifies for Augustine the continuation of their links with the Church. He directly affirms that in the sacraments of sectarians the Church is active: some she engenders of herself, others she engenders outside herself, of her maid-servant, and schismatic baptism is valid for this very reason, that it is performed by the Church (de bapt. i, 15, 23). What is valid in the sects is that which is in them from the Church, that which remains with them as their portion of the sacred inner core of the Church, that through which they are with the Church. *In quibusdam rebus nobiscum sunt.*

The unity of the Church is based on a twofold bond— the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace (cf. Eph. 4.3). In sects and schisms the bond of peace is broken and torn, but the unity of the Spirit in the sacraments is not brought to an end. This is the unique paradox of sectarian existence: the sect remains united with the Church in the grace of the sacraments, and this becomes a condemnation once love and communal mutuality have withered and died.

With this is connected St Augustines second basic distinction, the distinction between the validity or reality of the sacraments and their efficacy. The sacraments of schismatics are valid; that is, they genuinely are sacraments, but they are not efficacious by virtue of schism and division. For in sects and schisms love withers, and without love salvation is impossible. There are two sides to salvation: the objective action of Gods grace, and mans subjective effort or fidelity. The holy and sanctifying Spirit still breathes in the sects, but in the stubbornness and powerlessness of schism healing is not accomplished. It is untrue to say that in schismatic rites nothing is accomplished, for, if they are considered to be only empty acts and words, deprived of grace, by the same token not only are they empty, they are converted into a profanation, a sinister counterfeit. If the rites of schismatics are not sacraments, then they are a blasphemous caricature, and in that case neither economic suppression of facts nor economic

glossing over of sin is possible. The sacramental rite cannot be only a rite, empty but innocent. The sacrament is accomplished in reality.

Nevertheless it is impossible, Augustine argues, to say that in the sects the sacraments are of avail, are efficacious. The sacraments are not magic acts. Indeed, the Eucharist itself may also be taken unto judgement and condemnation, but this does not refute the reality or validity of the Eucharist. The same may be said of baptism: baptismal grace must be renewed in unceasing effort and service, otherwise it becomes inefficacious. From this point of view St Gregory of Nyssa attacked with great energy the practice of postponing baptism to the hour of death, or at least to advanced years, in order to avoid pollution of the baptismal robe. He transfers the emphasis. Baptism is not just the end of sinful existence, rather it is the beginning of everything. Baptismal grace is not just the remission of sins, but a gift or pledge. His name may be entered in the army list, but the honor of a soldier lies in his service, not in his calling alone. What does baptism mean without spiritual deeds?

Augustine wishes to say the same thing in his distinction between character and grace. In any case, there rests on everyone baptized a sign or seal, even if he falls away and departs, and each will be tried concerning this sign or pledge in the Day of Judgement. The baptized are distinguished from the unbaptized even when baptismal grace has not flowered in their works and deeds, even when they have corrupted and wasted their whole life. That is the ineffaceable consequence of the divine touch. This clear distinction between the two inseparable factors of sacramental existence, divine grace and human love, is characteristic of the whole sacramental theology of St Augustine. The sacraments are accomplished by grace and not by love, yet man is saved in freedom and not in compulsion, and for that reason grace somehow does not burn with a life-giving flame outside communality and love.

One thing remains obscure. How does the activity of the Spirit continue beyond the canonical borders of the Church? What is the validity of sacraments without communion, of stolen garments, sacraments in the hands of usurpers? Recent Roman theology answers that question by the doctrine of the validity of the sacraments *ex opere operato*. In St Augustine this distinction does not exist, but he understood the validity of sacraments performed outside canonical unity in the same sense. In *fact ex opere operato* points to the independence of the sacrament from the personal action of the minister. The Church performs the sacrament and, in her, Christ the high priest. The sacraments are performed by the prayer and activity of the Church, *ex opere orantis et operantis ecclesiae*. It is in this sense that the doctrine of validity *ex opere operato*, must be accepted. For Augustine it was not so important that the sacraments of the schismatics are unlawful or illicit (*illicita*); much more important is the fact that schism is a dissipation of love. But the love of God can overcome the failure of love in man. In the sects themselves—and even among the heretics—the Church continues to perform her

saving and sanctifying work. It may not follow, perhaps, that we should say that schismatics are still in the Church. In any case this would not be precise and sounds equivocal. It would be truer to say that the Church continues to work in the schisms in expectation of that mysterious hour when the stubborn heart will be melted in the warmth of Gods prevenient grace, when the will and thirst for communality and unity will finally burst into flame. The validity of sacraments among schismatics is the mysterious guarantee of their return to Catholic plenitude and unity.

The sacramental theology of St Augustine was not received by the Eastern Church in antiquity nor by Byzantine theology, but not because they saw in it something alien or superfluous. Augustine was simply not very well known in the East. In modern times the doctrine of the sacraments has not infrequently been expounded in the Orthodox East, and in Russia, on a Roman model, but there has not yet been a creative appropriation of Augustines conception.

Contemporary Orthodox theology must express and explain the traditional canonical practice of the Church in relation to heretics and schismatics on the basis of those general premises which have been established by Augustine.

It is necessary to hold firmly in mind that in asserting the validity of the sacraments and of the hierarchy itself in the sects, St Augustine in no way relaxed or removed the boundary dividing sect and communality. This is not so much a canonical as a spiritual boundary: communal love in the Church and separatism and alienation in the schism. For Augustine this was the boundary of salvation, since grace operates outside communality but does not save. (It is appropriate to note that here, too, Augustine closely follows Cyprian, who asserted that except in the Church even martyrdom for Christ does not avail.) For this reason, despite all the reality and validity of a schismatic hierarchy, it is impossible to speak in a strict sense of the retention of the apostolic succession beyond the limits of canonical communality. This question has been investigated exhaustively and with great insight in the remarkable article of the late C.G. Turner, *The Apostolic Succession*, in *Essays on the Early History of the Church and the Ministry*, edited by H.B. Swete (1918).

From this it follows without a doubt that the so-called branch theory is unacceptable. This theory depicts the cleavages of the Christian world in too complacent and comfortable a manner. The onlooker may not be able immediately to discern the schismatic branches from the Catholic trunk. In its essence, moreover, a schism is not just a branch. It is also the will for schism. It is the mysterious and even enigmatic sphere beyond the canonical limits of the Church, where the sacraments are still celebrated and where hearts often still burn in faith, in love and in works. We must admit this, but we must remember that the limit is real, that unity does not exist. Khomiakov, it seems, was speaking of this when he said: Inasmuch as the earthly and visible Church

is not the fullness and completeness of the whole Church which the Lord has appointed to appear at the final judgement of all creation, she acts and knows only within her own limits; and (according to the words of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 1 Cor. 5.12) does not judge the rest of mankind, and only looks upon those as excluded, that is to say, not belonging to her, who have excluded themselves. The rest of mankind, whether alien from the Church, or united to her by ties which God has not willed to reveal to her, she leaves to the judgement of the Great Day (*Russia and the English Church*, ch. xxiii, p.194).

In the same sense Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow decided to speak of Churches which were not purely true:

Mark you, I do not presume to call false any Church which believes that Jesus is the Christ. The Christian Church can only be either purely true, confessing the true and saving divine teaching without the false admixtures and pernicious opinions of men, or not purely true, mixing with the true and saving teaching of faith in Christ the false and pernicious opinions of men (*Conversation between a Seeker and a Believer Concerning the Orthodoxy of the Eastern Greco-Russian Church*, Moscow 1831, pp.27-29).

You expect now that I should give judgement concerning the other half of present Christianity, the Metropolitan said in the concluding conversation,

but I just simply look upon them; in part I see how the Head and Lord of the Church heals the many deep wounds of the old serpent in all the parts and limbs of his Body, applying now gentle, now strong, remedies, even fire and iron, in order to soften hardness, to draw out poison, to clean wounds, to separate out malignant growths, to restore spirit and life in the numbed and half-dead members. In this way I attest my faith that, in the end, the power of God will triumph openly over human weakness, good over evil, unity over division, life over death (*ibid.* , p.135).

These statements of Metropolitan Philaret are a beginning only. Not everything in them is clearly and fully expressed. But the question is truly put. There are many bonds, still not broken, whereby the schisms are held together in a certain unity with the Church. The whole of our attention and our will must be concentrated and directed towards removing the stubbornness of dissension. We seek not conquest, says St Gregory of Nazianzen, but the return of our brethren, whose separation from us is tearing us apart.