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Communion and Otherness

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COMMUNION AND OTHERNESS— how can these two be reconciled? Are they not mutually exclusive and incompatible with each other? Is it not true that by definition the other is my enemy and my “original sin,” to recall the words of Jean-Paul Sartre?

Our western culture seems to subscribe to this view in many ways. Individualism is present in the very foundations of this culture. Ever since Boethius in the Fifth Century ad identified the person with the individual (“Person is an individual substance of a rational nature”), and St. Augustine emphasized the importance of self-consciousness in the understanding of personhood, western thought never ceased to build itself and its culture on this basis. The individual’s happiness has even become part of the American Constitution.

All this implies that in our culture protection from the other is a fundamental necessity. We feel more and more threatened by the presence of the other. We are forced and even encouraged to consider the other as our enemy before we can treat him or her as a friend. Communion with the other is not spontaneous; it is built upon fences which protect us from the dangers implicit in the other’s presence. We accept the other only insofar as he does not threaten our privacy or insofar as he is useful to our individual happiness.

There is no doubt that this is a direct result of what in theological language we call the “Fall of Man.” There is a pathology built into the very roots of our existence, inherited through our birth, and that is the fear of the other.

This is a result of the rejection of the Other par excellence, our Creator, by the first man, Adam, and before him by the demonic powers that revolted against God.

The essence of sin is the fear of the Other, which is part of the rejection of God. Once the affirmation of the “self” is realized through the rejection and not the acceptance of the Other— this is what Adam chose in his freedom to do— it is only natural and

inevitable for the other to become an enemy and a threat. Reconciliation with God is a necessary pre-condition for reconciliation with any “other.”

The fact that the fear of the other is pathologically inherent in our existence results in the fear not only of the other but of all otherness. This is a delicate point requiring careful consideration, for it shows how deep and widespread fear of the other is: we are not afraid simply of certain others, but even if we accept them, it is on condition that they are somehow like ourselves. Radical otherness is an anathema. Difference itself is a threat. That this is universal and pathological is to be seen in the fact that even when difference does not in actual fact constitute a threat for us, we reject it simply because we dislike it. Again and again we notice that fear of the other is nothing more than fear of the different. We all want somehow to project into the other the model of our own selves.

When fear of the other is shown to be fear of otherness, we come to the point of identifying difference with division. This complicates and obscures human thinking and behavior to an alarming degree, with serious consequences. We divide our lives and human beings according to difference. We organize states, clubs, fraternities and even Churches on the basis of difference. When difference becomes division, communion is nothing but an arrangement for peaceful co-existence. It lasts as long as mutual interests last and may easily be turned into confrontation and conflict as soon as these interests cease to coincide. Our societies and our world situation today give ample witness to this.

If this confusion between difference and division were simply a moral problem, ethics would suffice to solve it. But it is not. St. Maximus the Confessor recognizes in this cosmic dimensions. The entire cosmos is divided on account of difference, and is different in its parts on the basis of its divisions. This makes the problem of communion and otherness a matter organically bound up with the problem of death, which exists because communion and otherness cannot coincide in creation. The different beings become distinct beings: because difference becomes division, distinction becomes distance.

St. Maximus makes use of these terms to express the universal and cosmic situation. Diaphora(difference) must be maintained, for it is good; but diaresis (division), a perversion of difference, is bad. The same is true of distance which amounts to decomposition, and hence death.

This is due, as St. Gregory of Nyssa observed, to the distance in both space and time that distinguish creation ex nihilo. Mortality is linked with createdness-out-of-nothing; this is what the rejection of the Other— God— and of the other in any sense amounts to. By turning difference into division through the rejection of the other we die. Hell, the eternal death, is nothing but isolation from the other.

We cannot solve this problem through ethics. We need a new birth. And this leads us to ecclesiology.

Ecclesial Communion

Because the Church is a community living within history and therefore within the fallen state of existence, all our observations concerning the difficulty in reconciling communion with otherness in our culture are applicable also to the life of the Church. The Church is made up of sinners, and she shares fully the ontological and cosmic dimension of sin which is death, the break of communion and final diastasis (separation and decomposition) of beings. And yet we insist that the Church in her essence is holy and sinless. On this Orthodox differ from other Christians, particularly of the Protestant family.

The essence of Christian existence in the Church is metanoia— repentance. By being rejected, or simply feared by us, the other challenges or provokes us to repent. Even the existence of pain and death in the natural world, not caused by anyone of us individually, should lead us to metanoia, for we all share in the fall of Adam, and we all must feel the sorrow of failing to bring creation to communion with God and overcoming death. Holiness in the Church passes through sincere and deep metanoia. All the saints weep because they feel somehow personally responsible for Adam's fall and its consequences for innocent creation.

The second implication of the Orthodox position concerning the holiness of the Church is that repentance can only be true and genuine if the Church and her members are aware of the true nature of the Church. We need a model by which we can measure our existence; the higher the model, the deeper the repentance. This is why we need a maximalistic ecclesiology with a maximalistic anthropology— and even cosmology— resulting from it. Orthodox ecclesiology, by stressing the holiness of the Church, does not and should not lead to triumphalism but to a deep sense of compassion and metanoia.

What is the model? From where can we receive guidance and illumination in order to live our communion with the other in the Church?

Faith In The Trinitarian God

There is no other model for the proper relation between communion and otherness either for the Church or for the human being than the Trinitarian God. If the Church wants to be faithful to her true self, she must try to mirror the communion and otherness that exists in the Triune God. The same is true of the human being as the "image of God."

What can we learn about communion and otherness from study of the Trinity? First, otherness is constitutive of unity. God is not first One and then Three, but simultaneously One and Three.

God's oneness or unity is not safeguarded by the unity of substance, as St. Augustine and other western theologians have argued, but by the monarchia of the Father. It is also expressed through the unbreakable koinonia (community) that exists between the three Persons, which means that otherness is not a threat to unity but the sine qua non of unity.

Study of the Trinity reveals that otherness is absolute. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are absolutely different, none of them being subject to confusion with the other two.

Otherness is not moral or psychological but ontological. We cannot tell what each Person is; only who He is. Each person in the Holy Trinity is different not by way of difference in qualities but by way of simple affirmation of being who He is. We see that otherness is inconceivable apart from a relationship. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all names indicating relationship. No person can be different unless it is related. Communion does not threaten otherness; it generates it.

Faith In Christ

We cannot be the "image of God" unless we are incorporated in the original and only authentic image of the Father, which is the Son of God incarnate.

This implies that communion with the other requires the experience of the Cross. Unless we sacrifice our own will and subject it to the will of the other, repeating in ourselves what our Lord did at Gethsemane in accepting the will of His Father, we cannot reflect properly in history the communion and otherness that we see in the Triune God. Since God moved to meet the other— His creation— by emptying Himself and subjecting his Son to the kenosis (self-emptying) of the Incarnation, the "kenotic" way is the only one that befits the Christian in his or her communion with the other, be it God or neighbor.

This kenotic approach to communion with the other is not determined in any way by the qualities that he or she might or might not possess. In accepting the sinner into communion, Christ applied the Trinitarian model. The other is not to be identified by his or her qualities, but by the sheer fact that he or she is, and is himself or herself. We cannot discriminate between those who are worthy of our acceptance and those who are not. This is what the Christological model of communion with others requires.

Faith In Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, among other things, is associated with koinonia (II Cor 13, 13) and the entrance of the last days into history (Acts 2, 17-18), that is eschatology.

When the Holy Spirit blows, He does not create good individual Christians, individuals “saints,” but an event of communion which transforms everything the Spirit touches into a relational being. The other becomes in this case an ontological part of one’s identity. The Holy Spirit de-individualizes beings wherever He blows. Where the Holy Spirit blows, there is community.

The eschatological dimension, on the other hand, of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit affects deeply the identity of the other: it is not on the basis of one’s past or present that we should identify and accept him or her, but on the basis of one’s future. And since the future lies only in the hands of God, our approach to the other must be free from passing judgment on him. In the Holy Spirit, every other is a potential saint, even if he appears to be a sinner.

Faith In The Church

It is in the Church that communion with the other reflects fully the relations between communion and otherness in the Holy Trinity. There are concrete forms of ecclesial communion that reflect this:

Baptism: This sacrament is associated with forgiveness. Every baptized person by being forgiven ceases to be identified by his or her past and becomes a citizen of the city to come, the Kingdom of God.

Eucharist: This is the heart of the Church, where communion and otherness are realized par excellence. If the Eucharist is not celebrated properly, the Church ceases to be the Church.

It is not by accident that the Church has given to the Eucharist the name of “Communion,” for in the Eucharist we find all the dimensions of communion: God communicates Himself to us, we enter into communion with Him, the participants of the sacrament enter into communion with one another, and creation as a whole enters through Man into communion with God— all this taking place in Christ and the Holy Spirit Who brings the last days into history and offers to the world a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

The Eucharist does not only affirm and sanctify communion; it sanctifies otherness as well. It is the place where difference ceases to be divisive and becomes good. Communion in the Eucharist does not destroy but affirms diversity and otherness.

Whenever this does not happen, the Eucharist is distorted and even invalidated even if all the other requirements for a “valid” Eucharist are satisfied. A Eucharist which excludes in one way or another those of a different race, sex, age or profession is a false Eucharist. The Eucharist must include all these, for it is there that otherness of a natural or social kind can be transcended. A Church which does not celebrate the Eucharist in this inclusive way loses her catholicity.

But are there no limits to otherness in eucharistic communion? Is the Eucharist not a “closed” community in some sense? Do we not have such a thing as exclusion from eucharistic communion? These questions can only be answered in the affirmative. There is indeed exclusion from communion in the Eucharist, and the “doors” of the synaxis are indeed shut at some point in the Liturgy. How are we to understand this exclusion of the other?

Eucharistic communion permits only one kind of exclusion: the exclusion of exclusion: all those things that involve rejection and division, which in principle distort Trinitarian faith. Heresy involves a distorted faith that has inevitable practical consequences concerning communion and otherness. Schism is also an act of exclusion; when schism occurs, the eucharistic community becomes exclusive. In the case of both heresy and schism, we cannot pretend that we have communion with the other when in fact we have not.

Ministry: There is no area of Church life where communion and togetherness co-exist so deeply as in the Church’s ministry. Ministry involves charismata of the Holy Spirit, and charisms involve variety and diversity. “Are we all apostles? Are we all prophets? Are we all teachers? Do all of us have the charisms of healing?” Such questions posed by St. Paul receive blunt negative answers from him. The body of Christ consists of many members and these members represent different gifts and ministries. No member can say to the other, “I need you not.” There is an absolute interdependence among the members and the ministries of the Church: no ministry can be isolated from the “other.” Otherness is the essence of ministry.

Yet at the same time otherness is acceptable only when it leads to communion and unity. When diaphora becomes diarsis, returning to the terminology of St. Maximus, we encounter immediately the fallen state of existence. In order to avoid this, the Church needs a ministry of unity, someone who would himself be needful of the “others” and yet capable of protecting difference from falling into division. This is the ministry of the bishop.

There is no Church without a bishop, nor is it by chance that there can be only one bishop in a Church, as declared by Canon Eight of the Council of Nicea. More than one bishop creates a situation in which difference may become division. The present-day situation of the Orthodox Diaspora, allowing cultural and ethnic differences to become

grounds of ecclesial communion centered on different bishops, is thus unfortunate, dangerous and totally unacceptable.

Personhood

Theology and Church life involve a certain conception of the human being: personhood. This term, sanctified through its use in connection with the very being of God and of Christ, is rich in its implications.

The Person is otherness in communion and communion in otherness. The Person is an identity that emerges through relationship (schesis, in the terminology of the Fathers); it is an "I" that can exist only as long as it relates to a "Thou" which affirms its existence and its otherness. If we isolate the "I" from the "Thou," we lose not only its otherness but also its very being; it simply cannot be without the other. This is what distinguishes the person from the individual.

The Orthodox understanding of the Holy Trinity is the only way to arrive at this concept of Personhood: the Father cannot be conceived for a moment without the Son and the Spirit, and the same applies to the other two Persons in their relation with the Father and with each other. At the same time each of these Persons is so unique that their hypostatic or personal properties are totally incommunicable from one Person to the Other.

Personhood is inconceivable without freedom; it is the freedom of being other. I hesitate to say "different" instead of "other" because "different" can be understood in the sense of qualities (clever, beautiful, holy, etc.), which is not what the person is about. In God all such qualities are common to the each three Persons. Person implies not simply the freedom to have different qualities but mainly the freedom simply to be yourself. This means that a person is not subject to norms and stereotypes and cannot be classified in any way; its uniqueness is absolute. This means that only a person is free in the true sense.

And yet one person is no person; freedom is not freedom from the other but freedom for the other. Freedom becomes identical with love. God is love because He is Trinity. We can love only if we are persons, allowing the other to be truly other and yet be in communion with us. If we love the other not in spite of his or her being different but because they are different from us, or rather other than ourselves, we live in freedom as love and in love as freedom.

The other is a condition of our freedom. Freedom is not from but for something other than ourselves. This makes the person ec-static, going outside and beyond the boundaries of the self. But this ecstasis is not to be understood as a movement towards the unknown and the infinite; it is a movement of affirmation of the other.

This drive of personhood towards the affirmation of the other is so strong that is not limited to the “other” that already exists but wants to affirm an “other” which is totally free grace of the person. Just as God created the world as free grace, so the person wants to create its own “other.” This is what happens with art: the artist creating a totally other identity as an act of freedom and communion. Living in the Church in communion with the other means, therefore, creating a culture. The Orthodox Church has always been culturally creative.

Finally, we must consider the ecological problem. The threat to God’s creation is due to a crisis between the human being and the otherness of the rest of creation. Man does not respect the otherness of what is not human; he tends to absorb it into himself.

This is the cause of the ecological problem. In a desperate attempt to correct this, Man may easily fall into the pagan alternative: to absorb Man into nature. We have to be very careful. Out of its tradition, Orthodoxy is called to offer the right Christian answer to the problem. Nature is the “other” that Man is called to bring into communion with himself, affirming it as “very good” through personal creativity.

This is what happens in the Eucharist where the natural elements of bread and wine are so affirmed that they acquire personal qualities— the Body and Blood of Christ— in the event of the communion of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, in a para-eucharistic way, all forms of true culture and art are ways of treating nature as otherness in communion, and these are the only healthy antidotes to the ecological illness.

We live in a time when communion with the other is becoming extremely difficult not only outside but inside the Church. Orthodoxy has the right vision of communion and otherness in its faith and in its eucharistic and ecclesial existence.

It is this that it must witness to in the midst of Western culture. But in order to be a successful witness, it must strive to apply this vision to its “way of being.” Individual Orthodox Christians may fail to do so, but the Church as a whole must not. This is why the Orthodox Church must watch carefully her own “way of being.” When the “other” is rejected on account of natural, sexual, racial, social, ethnic or even moral differences, Orthodox witness is destroyed.

Metropolitan John Zizioulas teaches theology in both London and Thessaloniki. This is a shortened version of a lecture given at the European Orthodox Congress given in October, 1993. The full text, as well as the text of other lectures given at the Congress, is available (in English, Dutch, French and German editions) from the Apostle Andreas Press, de Vrièrestraat 19. B-8301 Knokke-Heist, Belgium. The price is BFr 275 plus BFr 60 for postage.

