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The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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Surely a Catholic Church: The Orthodox Church as the Church

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The Orthodox Church is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The Church is one, and no salvation is found outside the Church. The unity of the Orthodox, catholicity, is a completeness. Where the grace of God is present, the Church is present. This is normally based on the grace of God poured out to the individual member of the Church through the sacraments of the Church and other means of grace. This grace grants the Church, and individual members of the Church, right doctrine about and right relationship with God in the work of salvation. Because the world is broken by sin, the unity of the Church, which is certain and known absolutely by God, is a “known unknown” to us.

We know the unity exists, but we will be consistently uncertain of boundaries. Some communities are most probably Orthodox, while others are most probably not. Individuals are members of the Church when they are recipients of the saving grace of God. Many will be recognizably Orthodox, yet some that seem Orthodox are not and other individuals that do not seem so Orthodox are recipients of divine grace. Only at the end of time will we know the truth as a certainty.

The Orthodox begin with a different view of catholicity defined by the fullness of the Spirit and led by Christ. As the Body of Christ, the Church must be one, but the Orthodox recognize that the Spirit moves where he wills in individuals. There is a philosophic limit to what can be known about God's work in individuals, so there must be ambiguity about the outer limits of the Church.

The ambiguity of our present knowledge is both true and practically important. Practical discussions and recognition of saving grace can take place on an individual level between Christians without lowering the doctrinal and ecclesiastical divisions that the Orthodox must maintain.¹ Far from being a disadvantage, the reality of ambiguity forces the Orthodox to look to God and live by the Spirit in pastoral ministry and the daily life of the layman. We know where the Church is, but not where it is not.

1. I write as a layman who has been orthodox for almost twenty-five years and as a philosopher in the analytic tradition, not a theologian. Hopefully, I have faithfully conveyed a school of Orthodox thought on catholicity and the nature of the Church. My hope is also to have made some helpful distinctions.

Catholic: Visible and Invisible Christ's One Body

A father in Christ, Father Michael Trigg, died too early.² With his Oxford doctorate and educational administrative background, he served as a university administrator and a parish priest. In one phase of his higher educational career, Trigg had been hired by a Christian university and was examined on his beliefs numerous times, but suddenly found his faith questioned. He had a peculiar disadvantage in every discussion because he was an Orthodox Christian. He was quizzed endlessly about his beliefs, and a committee demanded he submit a creedal statement. He sent the Creed of Nicaea. Pedantic scholars were not satisfied. "Of course," they said, "now what do you believe?"

"This." He was sure about what was most certain but would not pretend to have knowledge where he had none. Like all Orthodox Christians, he was true even to death. The Orthodox have no formula to produce absolute limits to the Church, but there are some things the faithful do know. He was not simple minded. He simply knew what was knowable and refused to commit to what was not. Trigg recognized the difference between what is true and what he could know was true and was willing to assert as certainly the case.³ That is a distinction most often missed.

Orthodoxy begins with the profound ideas that the church is the body of Christ and that this body cannot be divided. The body is one since the Lord Jesus could not have two bodies or a divided body and live. That will not answer all questions by any means, but what if the church, the Body of Christ, is not defined by one person, one group, and is not "invisible?" What if a man asserts, with the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, that there is one visible holy, catholic, and apostolic church?

"Where is this Church?"

"Where Christ is."

This is not going to be enough for those who crave personal certainty as opposed to divine reality. The Church is known, God knows, the holy angels know, the company of saints know, but you and I do not know. We only deal in probabilities. We live by faith, reasonable hope.

The Orthodox, perhaps not so surprisingly, begin with the Creedal and Scriptural truth that there is one body of Christ and that this body is visible. Catechisms and popular polemics make this point obvious. The Orthodox also accept that the cosmos is complex and God's ways often difficult to fathom. The providence and grace of God are real, rational, but are not always manifest to us. We know there is one church, know the contours of that church, and where the church can be found.

2. Parish-Admin, "Fr. Michael Trigg, Memory Eternal," Saint Michael Orthodox Church, last updated May 21, 2007, <http://www.stmichaelwhittier.org/parish-site/2007/fr-michael-trigg/>.

3. Naturally, there were issues, say, veneration of icons, where Father Michael would have had other explicit beliefs, but those were not the issues under discussion.

What is Catholicity?

The Catholic Church is the Fullness of the Body of Christ. Catholicity comes from the head of the Church, Jesus Christ, and His work in each Christian and in every gathering of those Christians. Those Christians receive the grace of God even if only “two or more are gathered.”

Catholicity is universal but also particular. The microcosm is found in the macrocosm and the macrocosm in the microcosm. Holy Orthodoxy knows one woman, the Mother of God, can hear the word of God and say, “yes,” and so, change everything. She is one person, yet in the Annunciation was the Church. When the Holy Spirit filled her womb, based on her consent to God, then the Church was fully present.

If only one parish of the Orthodox Church worshipping with her bishop was left, the fullness of the Body of Christ would be there, because Christ would be there fully in the sacraments. The Church would be catholic since the invisible Church would join with that parish worship.⁴ Such a hypothetical draws attention to the fact that the universal church is not a mere aggregate of local parishes and bishops, but an organic whole that recognizes commonality in love.

There are, God help us, many Orthodox bishops claiming Houston as their diocese, each surely Orthodox pastors, true Christians, yet the entire situation is irregular. The good in this brokenness is the confirmation that Orthodoxy can be found in situations that are not orthodox.

When I worship at Saint Basil, under a Greek bishop of Houston, I am Orthodox. When I worship at Saint George, under an Antiochian bishop of Houston, I am Orthodox. Why? The Spirit is in both places. The true light is seen at the end of the eucharistic feast. The Holy Ghost fills us as we hear the word of God preached from both pulpits. How do we know?

There are many clues. In all the Orthodox churches of Houston, the creed and the Scriptures are honored. We confess just as our ancestors did without reservation or equivocation. The sacraments of the Church are honored and given to the faithful. The icons are venerated. A single Christian, baptized in the Holy Spirit, contains the fullness of the faith. This does not lead to isolation. Any Christian will look for those like he is, and so form a community. We are commanded to love, even our enemies, so we will run to join with our brothers and sisters. A church community based on love will never be individualistic.

There is a normative ecclesiology, a bishop to guide, and in all but extraordinary cases, such as times of persecution, a single parish joins with all the other churches in

4. See the illuminating article, Nicholas Afanassieff, “The Church which Presides in Love,” in *The Primacy of Peter: Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church*, ed. John Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 91-143. Afanassieff goes very far suggesting, “Eucharistic ecclesiology teaches that the unity and fulness of the Church attach to the notion of a local church, and to the fluid and indefinite character of the Universal Church” (110).

their city and in the world. This is what is normal in healthy times, but the Orthodox Church is not fundamentally defined by power, but by the love of Jesus manifested in making saints for the kingdom. The city with a bishop and body of the faithful that consistently, over time, evangelize, worship, and make saints for the kingdom will become the head of that church in that generation.

The fullness, the catholicity, is in Christ's presence in the parish and in the individual. If there was, but one Orthodox Church left in all the world, cut off from every connection through some massive persecution, then that Church would be as much the Church as the Hagia Sophia at the height of the Eastern Empire. The church in Jerusalem has directed other churches as has the church in Rome.⁵

The Creed is plain and so is the teaching of the Church. There is only one body of Christ, visible and invisible, and any true schism in that divine body is impossible. Even in the analogy of the Church as the Bride of Christ, the bride is one. Christ cannot be married to more than one bride.

Every Christian keeps in mind that John the Baptist and then Jesus of Nazareth were not what was expected. The Spirit came in a way not expected. The moral law, the theological truth, was not contradicted but revealed in ways not anticipated. Things turned out rationally but exceptionally. The Orthodox, at our best, know this is true, so we look forward to what will (almost surely!) be remarkable but compatible with the ancient truth. This is the offense of the Church: we are not what the conservative or the liberal anticipated. We are consistent with the past while being new.

The Church is visible and one. Popular resources for Orthodox Christians or inquirers agree with (almost) all mainstream Orthodox theologians and holy teachers: The Church is visible and invisible, and the Church is one.

The Church is Visible and Invisible. The faithful can know the Church by the Spirit. Is this mere subjectivity? By no means! We look for signs by looking for a bishop who governs rightly using the right doctrine. This is partially subjective. Many of the faithful are too easily fooled by good liturgical practices. There is universal agreement amongst Orthodox thinkers that the Church is visible, and this idea is present in scholarly and popular presentations of ecclesiology:

The Church is both visible and invisible. The Church as the carrier of the divine gifts and divine energies, by which mankind is transformed into the Kingdom of God, is invisible. The Church as the assemblage of the people who confess faith in Christ is visible . . . the visible characteristics of the Church are the criteria of the invisible ones.⁶

The Church is not merely visible as a ghost might be. The Church is also subject to other senses in the faithful as living icons, the sacraments, and the liturgy itself:

5. Afanassieff, "Church which Presides," 163.

6. George Mastrantonis, *A New-Style Catechism on the Eastern Orthodox Faith for Adults* (Saint Louis, MO: Ologos Mission, 1969), 104.

“Christ’s Body, the Church, is tangible and visible.”⁷ The visible and tangible is pure as the Church qua Church, but as a hospital for sinners, may appear tainted. “Sinners do not taint the holiness of the Church. Her mission is exactly this: to extend sanctification to sinners. All men are sinners, and no one can say that is without sin.”⁸

This fact matters because it means no human, regardless of position, can make any church the Church due to his merit. We are all broken. Simultaneously, no human can make the Church, not the Church, since Jesus Christ is the guarantor of the holiness of the Church. Any person that knows Jesus contains the fullness of the Church. If the day should ever come when the antichrist spirit dominates all things and only a few are faithful, then on that day, the Church is no less present than at any other moment.

The Church is One. While there are many ways of speaking theologically of the life of the Church, some of which appear to create a division in the Church, the Orthodox Church is essentially one. Metropolitan Kallistos Timothy Ware notes, “The Church is a single reality, earthly and heavenly, visible and invisible, human and divine.”⁹

This we know without dispute. Yet, what are the boundaries of the Church? Who is in the Church? All the saved are in the Church, so what of those individuals who come to a canonical Orthodox Church who show the fruit of the work of the Spirit? What of those who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and the bishop discerns that despite the organization that officiated, the Holy Spirit came and did a saving work in that person? Is it possible that some sheep are in the Church, but physically distant?

We Do Not Always See the Boundaries of the One Church. As Sergius Bulgakov asserts, “This Orthodox spirit, which lives in the universal Church, is more apparent to the eye of God than to man. In the first place all baptized persons are Christians, hence in a certain sense Orthodox.”¹⁰

One need not go as far as Bulgakov and argue that all baptized persons are Christians, yet almost surely, some have received the grace of God. Those baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and who show the love of God, are growing to be like God, seem to have the grace of God. Our heart calls to their hearts. Most Orthodox do not rebaptize at least some Christians, and this is ultimately

7. Michael Shanbour, *Know the Faith* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2016), 29.

8. Elder Cleopa of Romania, *The Truth of Our Faith* (Thessalonica, Greece: Uncut Mountain Press, 2000), 41.

9. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 244.

10. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1988), 188. I recognize that there are important differences in the approaches to other Christians in the Orthodox scholars I quote. However, I think that most within the Orthodox tradition recognize that many that do not appear to be in the Church have been recipients of the grace of God (at least to some extent). The explanations of how this is the case differ and many would not go as far as Bulgakov on Christian baptism.

inexplicable if there is not a recognition that God has done a work in the life of that person. Of course, sometimes, a bishop may discern that the person just got wet, and no baptism has ever taken place. This can be known only through pastoral care and not a blanket rule.

Orthodoxy is diverse and so while most often individuals from other groups are not rebaptized, and some do not even receive chrismation, some Orthodox think this is wrong:

Among the Orthodox churches, different visions of ecumenism and of inter-Christian reconciliations lead to conflicts about ecumenism. "Some of us [Orthodox] see ecumenism as a sign of hope, others as a pan-heresy. Some of us think that Roman Catholics have true priesthood; others consider that they should be re-baptized. When we meet other Christians, we speak with a divided voice. Consequently, our participation in the ecumenical movement has been far less effective than it could and should have been."¹¹

Most of the canonical hierarchy have chosen to engage in ecumenical dialog that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America describes this way:

Recognizing the operation of God's Spirit in other Christian churches, which are not in communion with the Orthodox Church, implies at least the theoretical acknowledgment that these churches in their ecumenical commitment have the potential to enhance the life and the ministries of the One Church as well as these churches to be enhanced by the catholicity of the Orthodox church. As the churches recognize their limitation in their separation from one another and the need to move towards unity in faith, life and witness, they need to receive with humility and appreciation the gifts that God's Spirit has bestowed in each one. The refusal of the Orthodox churches to be in sacramental communion with other Christian churches, despite the affirmation that they are in an imperfect and incomplete manner members of the One Church of God, should not be perceived as a sign of arrogance; neither it should be a source of Orthodox triumphalism or self-sufficiency. It is a painful reminder for all that the unity of God's Church requires the fullness of the apostolic faith and tradition. It does not allow the churches to become complacent with present relative unity and collaboration. This leads to an irrevocable and unabated commitment of the Orthodox Churches to the fellowship of Christian churches that seek jointly to discover their unity in the faith, life and witness of God's Church.¹²

There is a general recognition in Orthodoxy that the borders of the Church are greater than canonical Orthodoxy minimally because of the work of the Holy Spirit in the

11. Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Clapsis, "*The Orthodox Church and The Other Christian Churches*," Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, last updated August 18, 2010, <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-orthodox-church-and-the-other-christian-churches>.

12. Clapsis, "Orthodox Church."

lives of individuals. Many Orthodox bishops discern this work as already present in those who come from other groups to enter the fulness of the faith. This is one reason that many are not rebaptized and why some pastors or priests received into Orthodoxy have been made priests in Orthodoxy.

Meanwhile, this does not reduce the desire that all those who are alive in the Spirit, thus part of the Church, should openly join the visible Church. Orthodox churches are communities where liturgical continuity plainly manifest catholicity by ancient ties, histories of faithfulness, and lines of unbroken pastors and bishops. We must look with charity to what God may be doing in other individuals without compromising the unity of the Church.

The Church Lives by the Spirit of God: the Catholic Church is a Place for Pentecost. There is no autopilot set of assumptions that lets us ignore living in the Spirit. We know we are in the Church when we are becoming like God, when we are seeing the true light after receiving the sacraments, and when we are under the authority of a bishop. Attempts to locate this source of authority in one patriarchate, such as Rome, seemed forced historically when applied to the church of the first century.

When James was in Jerusalem as a leader of the church, Rome was pagan. For centuries, Rome was the dominant Christian city, and New York City did not exist! Times change, even if slowly, yet the natural or organic changes in the family of God will reflect the nature of the good God. There was a time when Greek was the main language of most of the Orthodox, but now there are many languages in which Orthodox liturgy is said. There are several different liturgies, including a Western rite, that are recognized as Orthodox, and all of them show a slow development over time.

The Orthodox must not fall into the follies of the twenty-first century that believes the work of a committee or scholarly group can finally and fully define where God is and what God is doing. We have no rule that makes it certain that God has not worked in the life of a man who loves the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, shows great love to his neighbor, and gives evidence of becoming like Christ. We know some actions are bad, and God will not command his Church to commend those actions. This leaves billions of other actions God could tell a person to do or ways that God could choose to meet a person.

We are left knowing there is one holy, catholic, apostolic church, and we are reasonably certain where it is but have less certainty about where it is not. We sometimes see the fruits of salvation that only come from within the Church in certain lives of individuals that are not physically attached to the Church. This is not because of niceness or even implicit universalism regarding salvation. A nice person who physically attends the Church may not live by the Spirit and so be in the building, but not in the Church.

God knows.

This Lack of Certainty about “Who Is in the Church” Applies to Every Human Being. A pastor or bishop discerns the best he can with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Some are physically separated from the Church, and this is not good but have been baptized indeed by the grace of the Triune God. Some are physically in the Church but have rejected the grace found in the Sacraments. This is also not good. No ecclesiology will tell the Orthodox the limits of the Church since we cannot know the entirety of God’s work.

Of course, a second problem of the twentieth and twenty-first century is the odd assumption that the explosive growth in scientific knowledge should find a parallel in philosophy or theology. In science, old ideas are sometimes replaced and abandoned. Scientists do not use phlogiston as an explanation for combustion anymore. Of course, this is not always the case as some explanations or theories become subsumed in larger, more embracing models.

In philosophy, progress occurs differently. While some ideas do fade in importance, many major views are sharpened by dialogue with critics, not destroyed. Platonism, for example, remains viable after millennia in areas such as the philosophy of mathematics. The arguments used to defend mathematical Platonism improve, and the basic notion becomes more sophisticated, but Platonism is not replaced or abandoned. In fact, twentieth-century thinkers Heidegger and Nietzsche asserted that they had ended alternative philosophies, even all of metaphysics! This has not turned out to be true with their approach (including this assertion) just being one of many possibilities.

Christian theology, beginning in the divine revelation of God in Jesus Christ, also would have a different means of progress. If the Spirit is guiding the Church, then we would expect continuity from one generation to another. Theological truth and liturgical life would develop and change but within the truths found by the community of faith in reflecting on God in relationship with God. We read sacred Scriptures with the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox Church would be able to show continuity with the long experience of theologians, prelates, martyrs, holy fools, monarchs, and laity with God through the Holy Spirit.

The visible Church is seen when one considers how revelation comes to be understood through the Holy Spirit over time. The canonical Orthodox Church is visibly, organically, connected to the life of the ancient church, makes missionaries and martyrs in the modern world, and is led by bishops with a spiritual and historical connection to the entirety of Church history. The Orthodox faithful endure and are full of the life of the Holy Spirit.

Does the Holy Spirit work in others, outside canonical churches, and make those individuals part of this Church by the actions of the Holy Spirit? So Orthodox priests and bishops have discerned, and so these Spirit-filled too are, in one sense, Orthodox. This can be said without making the visible institutions, often in open schism with Orthodoxy, part of the Church.

Is it possible that some groups are Orthodox that are not part of the canonical churches? What of groups like the Syrian Orthodox? Are they not Christian?¹³ One need not, and I would argue, should not, make any judgment whatsoever about these other groups as groups. One can charitably discern the fruit of a given individual. The goal of the faithful is to move Godward and to do so in the Church.

What are the Theological and Philosophical Parameters for Catholicity?

This uncertainty at the edges of the catholicity is theologically necessary. God is a person and can do as he pleases. God is only limited by his nature and his will. He has the power to do as he wills. The faithful know that God will not do evil and so we will see consistency over the centuries in his commands and in the truth. He has revealed to humankind most fundamentally in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Church is found where Christ is found in a gathering of humans, visible and invisible. The marks of that Church are right belief and practice leading to theosis.¹⁴ Normatively, one will see a bishop leading the people Godward, as the Apostles did, and a people that show the fitness of the bishop by their progression toward God. The people of God are known by their bishop and the Orthodox bishop by their people. A worthy bishop is generally known by the fruit of his ministry to the faithful.

This Church is perfect and cannot die, because of the inclusion of the living and the dead, as members. The saints are with the living faithful, praying for us, leading us by their examples. The Orthodox Church will be known through the ability to produce saints and, if the circumstances warrant, martyrs.

A reasonable expectation, based on the character of God, is that the Orthodox Church may understand theological and ethical truths more deeply, but not in a manner inconsistent with the thrust of the arguments of the Fathers, the Councils, Scripture, and the totality of Sacred Tradition. Ideas related to the nature of Christ, for example, will develop precision over time. Implications of these ideas, such as the use of icons in worship after the Incarnation, will be grasped and introduced to the faithful. The liturgical practices of an Orthodox church would show steady development that is organic with the growth of the life of the Church.

13. Research for this all-too-brief article revealed a wide difference of opinion between Orthodox willing to consider that some groups (outside of the “canonical Orthodox churches”) may be also in the Church and those unwilling to do so. I am arguing from the perspective of the more restrictive view. Why? The organizations are of less importance than the persons. If an organization turns out to be part of the visible Church, then that would be good and interesting. However, if a soul is saved and not damned, then that is marvelous and of utmost importance. God saves by the Holy Spirit and those saved are in the Church. We do not know the identity of all those people.

14. Theosis is the process of a person becoming God or like God by participating in the divine nature. For a popular level discussion of theosis, see: Mark Shuttleworth, “Theosis,” Antiochian Orthodox Christian Arch Diocese of North America, accessed April 26, 2020, <http://ww1.antiochian.org/content/theosis-partaking-divine-nature>.

The Orthodox Church is defined philosophically by the questions asked, based on previous knowledge revealed to the Church. The Church, led by the Holy Spirit over time, developed icons and used them in worship. Any person, even if an emperor, bishop, or patriarch that banned this practice that was sacred to generations of the faithful, made a grave error. The iconoclast bishop became no bishop because he did not give voice to the faithful of all generations.

The proper response to questions about the use of icons answered why they were not only licit but good. Why had the Church globally become iconodule? Why was iconoclasm not proper, indeed a heresy? Orthodox thinkers like John of Damascus gave new and Spirit-filled answers to these questions that preserved the historic development of the Church and the faithful. More vitally, John of Damascus illuminated an old doctrine in a new way that gave new insights into old practices. Much theological speculation and eventual development could come from such insights.

The Orthodox philosopher or theologian knows what he or she knows. Speculation, philosophical and theological, is not only permissible but useful! However, that speculation, even if true, must be tested in the life of the Church. Generations of bishops must discuss and provide guidance. The impact of an idea on the faithful should be tested. As a result, the Orthodox Church will be uncertain about many things, even many truths.

Jesus has a bride, his Church. We can see clearly enough where that Church is, and that is what we need to know in order to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. The Spirit might be working over there in that person. A bishop might even discern that such a person received the grace of baptism. Other theologians will speculate whether certain Anglo-Catholics or some Wesleyans have important commonalities with Orthodox theology.¹⁵

Certainty in ecclesiastical boundary setting is a philosophic impossibility since the Church is present even if there was just one living member remaining in the Church. The fullness of God dwells in any man that is truly baptized.

15. Discussions between the Syrian Orthodox Church and Anglicans were very active at one point. See William Henry Taylor, *Antioch and Canterbury* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005). For a discussion of Wesleyanism and Orthodoxy see the collection, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, ed. S. T. Kimbrough Jr. Father Thomas Hopko says, “the essays in this volume clearly demonstrates that what informed, instructed, and inspired the Orthodox church fathers and their disciples and John and Charles Wesley and their companions was exactly the same. These were men and women bound to God’s word recorded in the Bible and recapitulated in Christ crucified. They read, prayed, preached, and lived this Word personally and in community as called, chosen, and faithful people justified, sanctified, and glorified by the one God and Father and his only Son Jesus Christ, God’s incarnate Word, and the one Holy Spirit. They were witnesses and worshippers of the Holy Trinity, one in nature and undivided” (pgs. 8-9). My views need not go as far as Father Hopko has here.

The Tension: One Body, Schismatics and Grace

If there is one body of Christ, then an attempt to divide that body is both impossible and evil. The Body of Christ cannot be divided. God cannot be defeated. If a person attempts the impossible, breaking the visible and invisible unity of the body, he cannot be in the Church. He has formed a sect, even if the new group looks and sounds very much like the Body of Christ. What is a sect?

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.¹⁶

No sect is the Church any more than a doxy is a wife. This is true, and this truth matters. How? An Orthodox Christian is saved in the Church and so would wish to fellowship within the Church. He eagerly would desire to be at home and be able to readily receive the Sacraments. He would love the truth and holiness and so would wish to find the Church that teaches and demonstrates sound doctrine and right practice. He would love all Christians in the Church and so would look for a bishop would speak the mind of the entire Church, including the vast number of saints who have gone to glory. This would not, however, resolve every question. Uncertainty will still exist and does exist within even canonical jurisdictions.

Some canonical Orthodox priests and bishops behave as if certain ecclesiastical divisions are human and not sectarianism. There are five persons who claim the title "Patriarch of Antioch," and there is much functional cooperation between the groups. John Binns writes,

To the east of the country is the Syrian diocese of the Gezira, and here I once spent a day visiting the homes in the Syrian Orthodox parish of Nasr'a with Father Louis, the parish priest. He told me that there were in the parish 300 Syrian Orthodox families, 130 Armenian Catholic, sixty Syrian Catholic, five Syrian Protestant, four Armenian, three Assyrian Church of the East, and two Chaldean. The Syrian priest knows them well and many of them attend his church. The life of the Christian communities in Syria shows clearly that there

16. George Florovsky, "The Limits of the Church," *Church Quarterly Review* 117, no. 233 (October 1933), 117.

is not one single Easter Orthodox Church, nor one doctrinal tradition that can be call Orthodoxy. The varied composition of the ecclesiastical life of modern Syria provides clear demonstration of the division, complexity, richness and turbulence of the history of the Christianity of the East.¹⁷

This practice makes sense if one thinks of the Church as one institutionally in heaven, while individuals of that Church on Earth can recognize each other as fellow Christians in a lifelong relationship under trying circumstances. If one assumes, as I do, that the Antiochian Patriarch represents the Orthodox voice of that holy and historic city, then the practice and words of those patriarchs matter. Something important is recognized in a statement such as this:

Over the past couple of months, many worrying reports and claims regarding the case and fate of the two Archbishops Boulos Yaziji and Mor Gregorius Youhanna Ibrahim who were kidnapped on April 22, 2013, in the western countryside of Aleppo – Syria, went viral in media outlets. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, and the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, have been closely monitoring these reports that are totally independent from our relentless efforts and endeavors in the search for our two missing Archbishops and we are determined to leave no stone unturned until we identify their whereabouts and their fate.¹⁸

As a minority during hundreds of years of Muslim rule, the Patriarch of Antioch knows his friends and has no hesitation in calling an archbishop of a noncanonical group an archbishop, and use the beautiful phrase “our two missing Archbishops.” The recognition of the canonical and the noncanonical churches of Antioch, and of each other’s ministry, is extensive. Documents from the canonical Antiochian church refer to the Syrian church as a sister church.¹⁹

The Orthodox do not pretend to know what they do not know, but patriarchs and bishops also do not refuse to know what the Spirit is saying to the Church if they think they are hearing the voice of God. The God-fearing Patriarch recognizes his brothers in the Spirit even as he sustains some physical divisions that must be sustained while the rest of global Orthodoxy discerns what the Holy Spirit is doing.

17. John Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

18. “A Statement Regarding Recent Reports on the Two Missing Archbishops of Aleppo,” Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, last updated January 20, 2020, <https://antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/a-statement-regarding-recent-reports-on-the-two-missing-archbishops-of-aleppo/2348/>.

19. Patriarch Ignatios IV and Patriarch Iganatius Zakka Iwas, “Statement of the Orthodox Church of Antioch on the Relations between the Eastern and Syrian Orthodox Churches,” Orthodox Unity (Orthodox Joint Commission), Various Documents Concerning Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Joint Commission and Unity, November 12, 1991, <https://orthodoxjointcommission.wordpress.com/2014/06/27/statement-of-the-orthodox-church-of-antioch-on-the-relations-between-the-eastern-and-syrian-orthodox-churches/>.

The Orthodox have this advantage: they do not pretend to a certainty nobody possesses. The desire for such knowledge, not unlike the choice in Eden to know what cannot be known by humans, creates tyrannical sin. Why? There is a profound arrogance in any limit placed on God that goes beyond his good nature and his own will. The Spirit blows where the Spirit wills, but a false prophet thinks he can say for a certainty what God is not doing. A prophet might know what some singular thing that God is doing, or the pattern of what God does, but no prophet can constrain God. Of course, God cannot sin, but God often does the unexpected. After all, men did not all recognize God in the flesh when he was on Earth!

Necessary Epistemological Uncertainty in People

A great error of modernity is the desire for certainty about things that must remain uncertain to us. Certainty about some truth is known only by God, not by men. Science, as science, can find some degree of certainty about some physical things, but it is blind to metaphysical truths.²⁰

Why? The metaphysical contains truths that God will not tell us, since they are part of his relationship with another individual. God will not justify himself, something he has no need to do, by revealing to one person the entire backstory of someone else. Grace might give us a vision of God for ourselves that we cannot doubt, but grace does not tell us someone else's story. C.S. Lewis has one of his characters ask about exactly what God is doing in the life of another, and the response was, "'Child,' said the Voice, 'I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.'"²¹ This is not mystery as an excuse for culpable ignorance but mystery as a recognition of what we cannot know by the nature of the topic under examination. The full story of God's work in another human life is not accessible to us because it is none of our business.

God works in the life of an individual, calling that person to himself. This process is lifelong and comes through many means. A priest and a bishop might discern the character of a person or the disposition of that person to God generally, but only God will know all the *whys* of His work in that life. God loves each human, and each individual relationship is unique. We do not need to know the entire story of God's work in any individual. Working out our own salvation is hard enough.

This is the unknown known: the vast number of souls that are in the ark of safety, the Church of God. There is one Church that we know, but the entire list of those in that Church is known now only by God. This side of the glorification we as

20. John Mark Reynolds, "On Creation and Post-Modernism," *First Things* (blog), The Institute on Religion and Public Life, March 18, 2010, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/03/on-creation-and-post-modernism>.

21. C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (HarperCollins. Kindle Edition), Location 2060.

individuals cannot have certainty that this person or even that parish is full of grace. Jesus Christ gives his grace and mercy to any person he wishes, and only he knows the state of any person's heart.

Orthodoxy describes a Church that is visible and invisible, spotless, and one. All who are redeemed are part of that one Church. There are signs of the life of the Spirit, and so we can recognize the Church. Because Christ is fully in each one of the faithful, the Church is not an aggregation made fuller or more catholic by numerical growth. As a result, there are individuals in the Church we do not know and will not know. This uncertainty humbles us and encourages us to work out our own story of salvation as we grow to be like the good God.

What Can We All Learn from Orthodoxy?

Some groups claim more certainty than they have or try to create systems that will make the exact boundaries of the Church certain based merely on creeds and outer conformity to liturgical norms. This always breaks down practically at the pastoral level, and this is the level that most fundamentally concerns us. One cannot merely point to a canonical bishop as the measure of the Church, because this ignores the deep truth that the Church is the continued work of the Holy Spirit. This work is found in the life of the individual Christian: a microcosm of the macrocosmic Church. In *The Mystical Theology of the Orthodox Church*, Vladimir Lossky concludes,

Thus, man is at one and the same time a part, a member of the Body of Christ by his nature, but also (considered as a person) a being who contains all within himself. The Holy Spirit who rests like a royal unction on the humility of the Son, Head of the Church, communicating Himself to each member of this body, creates, so to speak, many Christs, many of the Lord's anointed: persons in the way of deification by the side of the divine Person.²²

My Father Michael of blessed memory spoke a profound truth when he said he knew where the Church was, but not where it was not. He could sense the eucharistic power and the grace of the Orthodox churches (in the main), yet also knew that

Inasmuch as the earthly and visible Church is not the fullness and completeness of the whole Church which the Lord appointed to appear at the final judgement of all creation, she acts and knows only within her own limits . . . She does not judge the rest of humankind, and only looks upon those as excluded, that is to say, not belonging to her, who exclude themselves. The rest of humankind, 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.²³

22. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1998), 174.

23. Alexis Khomiakov, *The Church is One*, section 2, quoted in Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 308.

We seek theosis, becoming like God through God's grace. This grace is mediated by the Bible, Sacraments, and any other means God chooses to use. Practically, the canonical Orthodox Churches have historic continuity with sacred tradition, have maintained fidelity to Sacred Scriptures, have defended the holy icons, and dispensed the ancient sacraments of the Church. Any given parish of those ancient churches (and their progeny) is most probably part of the Church. However, I have seen some parishes and monasteries that appeared Orthodox dissolved, because what appeared true was not. There might have been more orthodoxy and orthopraxis down the road at some other gathering!

The boundaries of Orthodoxy are based on the grace of God. This grace will produce the right doctrine, and this doctrine will be consistent with itself over time since God is unchanging. The grace of God is revealed in history, so the visible Church will have a link to the Apostles. The Orthodox Churches of the East and those who remained in communion with them (such as the Russian, Romanian, or Bulgarian Orthodox Churches) are the most apparent parts of that one body.

Where else is the grace of God? The answer will be different for the Orthodox if discussing organizations or individuals. God's grace has been given to individuals who belong to organizations that may be schismatic. This is the most sensible explanation for why, in the main, Orthodox Churches do not rebaptize those received into the Church who have been previously baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. The Orthodox do not recognize the organization, but the grace apparent in the individual being received. This is the very grace that has eventually drawn them to the fullness of the faith.

This grace does not come because of schism but despite it. The very remnants remaining in Christian groups, the Creeds, orthodox doctrine affirmed, Sacred Scriptures, and elements of liturgical practice may stimulate a congregant Godward. The group possessing these treasures may mix them with error.²⁴ God may baptize despite the person or group doing the baptism. After all, this is true when an apparent, but false "Orthodox" priest engages in baptism. The priest or even a bishop may end up laicized, but the faithful are not rebaptized. Sacred Scripture exists and is studied in many groups. There may have an overlay of false exegesis from the Orthodox perspective, but Scripture remains Sacred Scripture. God can speak there.

Father Michael, the priest who began my own journey to Orthodoxy, embraced a generous Orthodoxy that saw many individuals that had received the Holy Spirit. Like Hopko, he felt he had much to learn from what the Spirit had said to other groups separated from the fullness of the faith. He was eager to dialog with anyone who proclaimed the Lordship of Christ and belief in the triune God. Sadly, while he made many dear friends in such dialogue, he also suffered greatly.

24. A reminder that many Orthodox prelates and theologians have seen some groups as potentially being the Church. The Syrian Orthodox Church is an example.

Father had given up much materially to become Orthodox but felt the winner. He had gained the fulness of the faith, yet saw much that was good, true, and Godward in what he had learned at Oxford and at seminary as a younger man. He once told me that he thought he was Orthodox before he was Orthodox. One of his last acts was to bless his congregants because that is what a good priest does.

He made visible the grace of God.