The Ecclesiology of the Parish in the Digital Age

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Introduction

We live in the Digital Age, also known as Information Age, which followed the Industrial Age. Nowadays, many aspects of our lives are computerized, most data is in digital form, and large amounts of information are available because of computer technology. If the Industrial Age has shifted the rhythms of humanity's life and changed societal dynamics in ways that have significantly affected religious life, even more so, the Digital Age is changing our ecclesial life, raising both challenges and opportunities. This essay addresses online worship and catechesis, internet pseudo-authorities who impoverish parish life, and the role of the priest as the spiritual father responsible for the life of the parish, in an attempt to begin the conversation on the ecclesiological identity of the parish in Orthodox theology[1].

Parish Life in the Digital Age

Liturgical Participation

The communion that the faithful experience in the Liturgy presupposes the act of gathering together in one place. The normative gathering place is the church building, but some communities have several places of worship especially in Greece, others do not have one at all, and

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1. I have addressed several themes presented in this essay in R. Bordeianu, *Icon of the Kingdom of God: An Orthodox Ecclesiology*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 2023.

persecutions affect Christians' ability to gather in one place, forcing them to retreat underground and, most recently, into online communities. Unfortunately, persecution is still a reality today. Orthodox faithful from mainland China, for example, are forbidden to gather publicly, but watch services and catechesis online, streamed from other countries. Their martyred Orthodoxy is an online Orthodoxy.

To further qualify the act of gathering into one place, an increasing number of parishes in the free world stream their *services online* to respond to the needs of those who are shut in or are unable to come to church for reasons of physical and emotional health, occupation (some jobs requiring their presence away from the church), or travel to places without a church. If these cases are usually in the minority, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online worship became the norm for the majority of Christians. In all these situations, the physical gathering of the entire community in one place is impossible. Instead, the faithful join the assembly of the Church virtually, in a community that extends beyond the normative physical space of the parish into the online space. This unprecedented ecclesiological reality –the expansion of the liturgical assembly into the virtual realm– has already become normative.

Having said this, however, virtual worship is not a substitute for in-person liturgical life; the Church remains an embodied reality. Locality and place are manifestations of an incarnate Church, gathered around the body and blood of Christ, understood as flesh tabernacling among us and made present in the Spirit of God. A sacrament remains in need of matter: bread, wine, water, oil, all of which cannot be substituted in an online community. Extending the community of the faithful who gather in one place to the online realm is a positive adaptation to the practical needs of our time, but exclusively virtual gatherings are insufficient. The members of the Church gathered in the parish building have the duty to visit the sick and the shut-ins in their homes with the sacraments of Communion and Holy Unction and to bring them to church whenever possible.

Digital "Judges of Orthodoxy"

The Digital Age also expanded our abilities to gather virtually to have administrative meetings, coordinate our ministries, and conduct our teaching activities. Online education is a venue for theologians to participate in public forums, for dioceses to post contents, podcasts, and texts. Today we can learn from the greatest Orthodox minds about the beauty of our faith with a simple computer click.

Unfortunately, the digital realm also provides the space for internet trolls who create a false image of Orthodoxy, as opposed to how Orthodoxy is actually experienced in the local parish. Online communities often impose a fundamentalist perspective. People who are not part of parishes (either in a remote monastery or an individual with a computer) pose as teachers and overseers with an authority equal to that of the ecumenical councils, anathemizing those with whom they disagree. Their criticism is based on a fundamentalist reading of patristic writings and conciliar-canonical traditions. A fundamentalist repetition of texts takes them out of their initial context, ignoring the complexity of the arguments, intentionally overemphasizing some nuances over others, and forcefully applying them in contemporary contexts in which the original authors would have never implemented them. That is fundamentalism, in short[2]. *Today, the greatest danger facing the proper reception of the Eastern tradition is not relativism or secularism, but fundamentalism.*

Jaroslav Pelikan famously said:

> *Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living*. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition[3].

2. C. Hovorun considers fundamentalism among the most popular modern heresies in the Orthodox world, together with nationalism and anti-Semitism. C. Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2018, pp. 4, 89-116.

3. J. Pelikan, "Interview", in: *U.S. News & World Report*, July 26, 1989 [emphasis added].

The contrast that Pelikan sets between Tradition and traditionalism is similar to Georges Florovsky's contrast between the mechanical repetition of patristic formulae and a theology according to "the mind of the Fathers", or a neo-Patristic synthesis[4]. He recommends going beyond "archaic formulas", simple "appeal to antiquity", and a "theology of repetition". Florovsky advocates a "creative extension of ancient tradition", being "in complete conformity with the mind of the Church", and the rediscovery of the "catholic mind", which is the language of the Scriptures, the worshipping Church, and the Fathers[5].

After acknowledging the merits of neo-Patristic synthesis and the unprecedented resurgence of historical studies that is has generated, Pantelis Kalaitzidis asserts that it also resulted in introversion, trapping Orthodox theology in a "fundamentalism of tradition" or in a "fundamentalism of the Fathers". It created the idea that, in order to remain certain that we are within the limits of truth, we constantly take refuge in the past. Such an attitude does not account for the guiding work of the Spirit in the Church of our times[6].

It is important to pause for a moment on something that Kalaitzidis mentioned in passing, namely that those who embrace a "fundamentalism of tradition" remain certain that they are within the limits of truth. Mark Powell similarly explores the concept of "epistemic certainty" in Evangelical and Catholic traditions. Maximalist interpreters of authority within both these traditions look for a source of teaching where they can find the truth without room for interpretation, without further debate, a truth that remains applicable regardless of context. They find that

4. G. Florovsky, "Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church", in: *Aspects of Church History*, Collected Works 4, Nordland, Belmont, Mass. 1975, pp. 17-18, 22, 29; Florovsky's "Address at 80 Years of Age" in: "A Sketch of the Life of Georges Florovsky", in: A. Blane (ed.), *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1993, p. 154.

5. G. Florovsky, "St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers", in: *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View;* Collected Works vol. 1, Nordland, Belmont, Mass. 1972, pp. 105-08, 44, 20. Florovsky, "The Church: Her Nature and Task", ibid. p. 58. Florovsky, "Western Influences in Russian Theology", Florovsky, "Western Influences in Russian Theology [1939]", Collected Works 4, op.cit, pp. 181-82.

6. P. Kalaitzidis, "From the 'Return to the Fathers' to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54, 1 (2010), pp. 8-11.

place either in the literalist approach to the Bible or in papal infallible teachings, respectively. In the first case, biblical inerrancy is meant to counteract historical critical methods of scriptural interpretation and liberal Protestantism. In the second case, papal infallibility is hoped to guard against Protestant attitudes towards Scripture and Tradition, as well as then-modern challenges outlined in Pius IX's 1864 Syllabus of Errors: "rationalism, indifferentism, socialism, communism, naturalism, free-masonry, separation of Church and State, liberty of the press, liberty of religion, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization"[7]. Those who pay attention to the Orthodox blogosphere will surely see the resemblance between the issues addressed by Pope Pius IX and today's Orthodox ultra-traditionalists.

To state this differently, maximalist Catholics share this claim to epistemic certainty not only with literalist evangelicals, but also with Orthodox fundamentalists. The latter are actually much closer to their Western counterparts than they would admit; it is only the source of authority that differs. Conciliar decisions, canonical norms, and patristic writings are, like papal statements or the literal meaning of Scripture, lifted up from their context to create an objective teaching that cannot be questioned. *Orthodox historical fundamentalism is a maximalist view that misrepresents and misinterprets the Tradition, posing as an infallible authority*. Alas, biblical inerrancy, papal infallibility, and historical fundamentalism fail to deliver epistemic certainty.

In response, it is necessary to remember that no Church reality speaks infallibly in and of itself: not the Pope, not the Ecumenical Council, not the literal meaning of the Scripture, and certainly not a person or a group of people who are self-proclaimed "judges of Orthodoxy." But any person can speak infallibly if that person represents the consensus of the Church. The ultimate authority is the entire Church.

7. M. E. Powell, *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation of an Ecumenical Issue*, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge UK 2009, pp. 2-28. For the context that gave rise to the Syllabus, especially its references to the relationship between Church and state in the events leading up to the French Revolution, see J. C. Murray, "The Church and Totalitarian Democracy", *Theological Studies* 13, no. 4 (1952), pp. 525-546.

Already in the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons affirmed that the entire Church possesses *regula fidei*, or the "canon of truth", or "the rule of truth"[8]. This rule is not so much a set of fixed statements (though it will later be associated with baptismal Creeds), but with the entire life of the Church. St. Irenaeus' opponents misused the Scripture by reconstructing the faith according to their beliefs. Irenaeus uses the comparison of those who take apart a beautiful mosaic representing a king, rearrange its elements, and create the image of a dog or of a fox, similar to how his contemporaries reconstructed Homeric poems by rearranging various lines[9]. Similarly, traditionalists are simply rehashing fragments from patristic writings and conciliar decisions out of their context and against the spirit (Spirit) in which they were written. In response, what is needed today is a bold reaffirmation of Tradition in its spirit (Spirit), as the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writings of old continues to breathe life into the Church today, inspiring ever-new responses that remain faithful to Tradition.

To avoid any misunderstanding of the position expressed above, it is important to affirm that the call to live our Tradition in our times is not a dismissal of historical norms. Florovsky writes that "Christianity is a religion of historians [...]. Christianity is basically a vigorous appeal to history, a witness of faith to certain particular events in the past"[10]. Indeed, converts often state that one of the greatest points of attraction to Orthodoxy is its sense of Tradition: the same faith has been preserved since biblical times. In their quest to find the church that the Apostles have left behind, these converts find the Orthodox Church. This apostolic spirit has been preserved and enhanced from the Patristic era until today, when the Church still acts in the spirit of the Apostles and –to use Florovsky's expression– "the mind of the Fathers"[11].

8. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies*, J. R. Payton (ed.) & James Clarke, Cambridge 2012, IV, 35, 4, p. 142.
9. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer*. I, 8, 1-9, 4.
10. G. Florovsky, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian", in: *Christianity and Culture:* Collected Works 2, Nordland, Belmont, Mass. 1974, p. 31
11. Florovsky, "St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers", in: *Bible, Church, Tradition*, Collected Works 1, Nordland, Belmont, Mass. 1972, pp. 105-120, here 105-108.

The mention of converts to Orthodoxy is also intended to share a major aspect of parish life in American Orthodoxy. 51% of the faithful in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) and 29% of the Greek Archdiocese of America (GOA) faithful are converts; in the OCA, the percentage of clergy who are converts is even higher – 59%[12]. In part, this reality is the result of online worship and education, and most parishes have converts who first learned about Orthodoxy online. So the Orthodox presence in the digital realm retains its crucially positive elements, despite the negatives analyzed here.

The Parish and Its Priest

As communities and their priests respond to today's challenges, they are criticized by traditionalist circles that impose their reading of history as unchangeable norms by means of online forums; this is, ironically, a rather non-traditional way to solve issues in the Church. These online figures claim an undue power over the parish.

In an era of unlimited communication, where people from anywhere in the world can judge the life of a parish across continents, these self-proclaimed "judges of Orthodoxy" regard the entire Church as their jurisdiction. And yet, Orthodox canon law states that duly appointed Church leaders have limited jurisdictions; a visiting bishop cannot preach in another bishop's diocese without the approval of the local hierarch. So how can various individuals who are removed from the context of a certain parish claim the authority to judge the pastoral life of that community and the ways in which the parish priest exercises his ministry in response to the local context? Internet "authorities" misrepresent any creative exercise of pastoral ministry in a scandalous and divisive way, creating real obstacles for priests who are afraid of being criticized online, to the detriment of their ministry. One often encounters priests who desire to be more pastoral, but cannot because of the internet. It is urgent in this situation to reaffirm the authority of the parish priest. What is a priest? Orthodox ecclesiology tends to be silent on this subject, preferring to focus

12. Al. Krindatch, *The Orthodox Church Today*, Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, Berkley, CA 2008, p. 13.

on the bishop and, more recently, the deacon. So let me offer only one suggestion, for lack of space here.

As the parish priest coordinates ministries and nurtures charisms in his community, he is *the spiritual father of the parish*, who uses his God-given intellectual abilities to respect the spirit of Orthodox teachings and discipline for the spiritual growth of his parishioners, without following blindly the letter. Monasticism provides a notable precedent in this regard. In a monastery, the abbot or the abbess has a significant authority concerning the spiritual lives of the monastics entrusted to them. Given this role of spiritual motherhood and fatherhood, the abbess or the abbot has traditionally made significant decisions regarding the *typikon* and the Liturgy[13], pastoral considerations, and the teachings professed in their monasteries. The same authority should translate into the parish, where the priest is the spiritual father of his community. Unfortunately, priests sometimes hesitate to fully take on their role as spiritual fathers because they regard themselves merely as extensions of the bishop and the parish as an incomplete unit of the diocese. That about sums up the Orthodox ecclesiology of the priest and the parish. As a corrective, we need to emphasize priesthood as a ministry based on the traditional role of spiritual fatherhood in which the priest takes responsibility for his parish, with courage, boldness, and care for his flock.

The parish priest straddles the spiritual needs of his parish and the illusional "universal" norms of Orthodox liturgy, teaching, and discipline of the larger Orthodox Church. In a universalist worldview, one would consider the role of the parish priest as having to embody the common Orthodox life in the local parish community. But this universalist view raises two questions: first, how much unity in liturgy, teaching, and discipline is there in the Orthodox Church worldwide and through the centuries? Any cursory reading of history shows a significant degree of diversity, which raises the second question: which of the multiple facets of Orthodoxy in space and time should be embodied in the local parish? The spiritual father of the parish has the main role –together

13. R. F. Taft, "The Byzantine Office in the Prayerbook of New Skete: Evaluation of a Proposed Reform", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 48, 2 (1982), pp. 336-357, here p. 338.

with the community that he leads and the rest of the parishes under the leadership of the local bishop– in discerning the answers to this question.

The Ecclesiology of the Parish

This final section returns to ecclesiology proper, with a discussion of the parish, which is the place where the faithful experience the Church.

Almost the entirety of modern Orthodox theology understands the local eucharistic assembly to be the diocese gathered around its bishop in the Eucharistic celebration. This view is reflective of the *eucharistic ecclesiology* of Nicholas Afanasiev and its revised versions in the communion ecclesiologies of Dumitru Staniloae and Metropolitan John Zizioulas, which have dominated Orthodox thought on this issue. Complementary to this theological approach to the local church, a practical or experiential approach presents a different picture: the diocese does not gather all its faithful to celebrate a single Eucharist. The bishop celebrates the Liturgy in the parish that he visits, not in his office where most of his ministry takes place. The diocese may have a chapel at its headquarters, but it does not have a community entrusted to its pastoral ministry. Thus, the *locus* of the eucharistic celebration is the parish, and not the diocese.

Despite being the most common church structure, the parish appears to have no ecclesiological identity and the history of its development is insufficiently studied. As Schmemann contends, "the process which transformed the original 'episcopal' structure of the local church into what we know today as parish [...] although it represents one of the most radical changes that ever took place in the Church, remained, strange as it may seem, virtually unnoticed by ecclesiologists and canonists"[14].

What happened? The earliest Christian communities, though they were headed by what we call today bishops, resembled quite closely today's parishes. Then, as Metropolitan John Zizioulas writes, the parish emerged

14. Al. Schmemann, "Towards a Theology of Councils", *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1962), p. 177.

> around the middle of the third century [...] *as a result of necessity*. The rapid rise in the number of Christians in the cities and perhaps also in the rural interior, and the lengthy absence of the Bishops from their Churches which followed obliged the Church to entrust the leadership of the Eucharist to the Presbyters on a more permanent than usual basis and to break up the one Eucharist under the leadership of the Bishop into several assemblies centered on Presbyters[15].

Zizioulas concludes that the emergence of the parish –and thus the bishop's absence from most eucharistic celebrations– was an *anomaly*, a "rupture in its own eucharistic ecclesiology. For it was no longer possible to equate every eucharistic celebration with the local Church"[16]. Given the incongruence between the earlier communities and today's ecclesial structures, Orthodox ecclesiology tends to attribute no ecclesiological significance to the parish. And yet, that is where we experience the Church.

For reasons of space limitations, the historical development of the parish and other aspects of its ecclesiological identity cannot be discussed here. But, to simply point in the direction of these aspects, it is possible here to provide a definition of the parish as the community of the faithful gathered around the priest for the celebration of the Eucharist and other services; for being an instrument of the Kingdom, bringing healing and proclamation of the good news to their locality and the world in general; and for exercising the various charisms of its members for the building up of the Body of Christ. This community extends beyond the physical space to the digital realm. Furthermore, if in majority Orthodox countries a parish is the community of believers who share the same faith and the fullness of liturgical life, in Western Orthodoxy the parish is more than the body of communicants with the same beliefs. In varying degrees of

15. J. D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, transl. Elizabeth Theokritoff, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass. 2001, pp. 216-17.

16. J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians, no. 4, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1985, p. 251. Turcescu considers that the emergence of the parish actually exposes a weakness of eucharistic ecclesiology, rather than being a lamentable historical development. L. Turcescu, "Eucharistic Ecclesiology or Open Sobornicity?", in: L Turcescu (ed.), *Dumitru Stăniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, The Center for Romanian Studies, Iaşi, Oxford, Palm Beach, Portland 2002, p. 95.

commitment, Catholic and Protestant faithful are members of Orthodox parishes and the parish welcomes a significant number of converts, some of whom learned about Orthodoxy online.

Epilogue

In conclusion, in our Digital Age, one of the challenges facing Orthodox theology is to define the parish as an ecclesiological reality. Addressing online worship and catechesis, internet pseudo-authorities who impoverish parish life, and the role of the priest as the spiritual father responsible for the life of the parish is but a simple beginning in that direction.

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