

# Identity and Theological Ethos of the Eastern Churches

*Hieromonk Elisha*

## Introduction

The few points developed below aim to emphasize the fundamental unity and amazing coherence of the Eastern Churches' ethos, which is that of the Christian *kerygma* itself. For what, finally, is the Church? Nothing other than the living mystery of Christ, that is the extension, in history, of the Lord's incarnation. If we take St. Paul's fundamental expression literally, defining the Church as being the 'Body of Christ', if we strive to understand the deep meaning of the christological dogma, whose historical development has been so painful, then we will have a full and fitting vision of ecclesial experience.

This overall vision may also allow us to propose some appropriate questions. Are our respective Churches fully living all the aspects that constitute them as a complete ecclesial body? Does not neglecting any of those aspects of their ecclesial existence diminish them in their witness as well as in their ontological reality? The stakes are important as this embraces altogether our witness to the world and the most intimate reality that constitutes us as Christians

Let's try to outline quickly the different dimensions of Christ's mystery, as it is – or should be – lived in the Church. Though the present viewpoint is from the Byzantine tradition, all the Eastern Churches present a common ethos. Setting aside the aspect of inculturation and the local particularities, the following lines will underline what is shared by all in the ecclesial existence. However, as we will see, this dimension of inculturation is part of the very nature of the Church.

## The mystery of Christ as foretold in the old covenant

Of course, we no longer live in a time where we ought “*to prove from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ*” (Acts 18,28), and to establish the legitimacy of the new Covenant. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical endeavour of the Church Fathers retains validity on at least two points: the understanding of the Scriptures and the relation between revelation and human cultures.

Let's briefly remind the basic principle of the Church Fathers' exegesis, which is that of the early Church at large: Christ is the fullness of revelation (Jn 1,18), the climax of the Scriptures, that bear witness to him (Jn 5,39 & Lk 24,27). It implies that the focus of biblical revelation is the incarnation of the Word. Following St Athanasius, we are therefore driven to interpret the Scriptures through the different modes of existence of the Word: his eternal being with the Father, the foretelling of his role in the old Covenant, his freely accepted *kenosis* during the incarnation, and finally his glorification, which includes the humanity he took upon himself. This amazing richness of the typological exegesis developed by the Fathers is first brought to us through the liturgy (let us mention, only to speak about the Byzantine tradition, the prayer of offering, in the anaphora of St Basil or, to remain in the Greek patristic tradition, the admirable Easter Homily of Melito of Sardis). It seems desirable that this exegesis should become the very heart of our Churches catechetical teaching, and be spread out through biblical study groups. The knowledge of the Scriptures should not be an exclusive characteristic of the Protestant and Reformed Churches, but, for our part, should show a fidelity to the works or the doctors of the Early Church, and lead us to a deeper understanding of God's divine *economia*.

Another aspect of revelation must be emphasized, called by the Greek apologists "*logos spermatikos*", which is fundamental in contextual theology. Indeed, God gradually revealed himself in the old Covenant, and for that purpose elected a given people in order to prepare his coming at the "*fullness of times*" (Gal 4,4). But he also brought forth, in every human culture, some seeds of truth which are milestones for future evangelisation. It belongs to the Church's discernment to identify those elements of truth, and to use them for the insertion of the Gospel into the local context, in order that God may be glorified by "*every nation, tribe, people and language*" (Rev 7,9).

### **The mystery of Christ as fully accomplished in the historical existence of the word**

The mystery of Christ is fulfilled in the historical existence of the Word that the Father "*appointed to be head over everything for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way*" (Eph 1,23). We must understand in the most basic way that we are members of this glorious body, and therefore that there is an equivalence between Christ and the Church. Thus the ultimate goal of the divine economy, whose heart is the incarnation of the Word, is that we "*may participate in the divine nature*" (2Pet 1,4). This participation is understandable only through a correct christological confession of faith. This one must not be understood as intellectual self-satisfaction or dogmatic conformity, but rather as the ultimate destiny of humanity and the salvation of every individual.

If, as we can see in Church history, the shaping of the christological doctrine has been a very painful one, it is in proportion to its importance. Whatever the legitimate differences in formulation or vocabulary may be, this doctrine can be summarised, in spite of its apparent complexity, in the double assertion of the full humanity and divinity of Christ. Both should be maintained with the strictest rigour. Negating or diminishing in the slightest way the divinity of Christ ruins the faculty, for humanity, to fulfil its divine vocation, and finally denies any possibility of real ecclesial life. On the other hand, if the full humanity of Christ is diminished or questioned, any relationship with the divine world just cannot exist. Christ's double nature is the only possible and effective mediation between God and us.

We must be aware that this crucial point of Christian faith always was, and will remain, a stumbling-block. On the one hand, it is the wonder of human history, the power of divine salvation that spreads in it, and the irreducible originality of the Christian faith. And on the other, it is madness in regard to human wisdom, which meets its crucifixion in it. We can't in any way attenuate this scandal, since it is in itself the "*power and wisdom of God*" (1Cor 1,24).

Faithfulness to the christological doctrine of the Church should not lead us, as occurred too often in the past, to take up its historical controversies. Our faith in the incarnation is a doctrine of salvation, a testimony of our life in Christ, and not a means for polemics to prove to others that we are right - and that they are wrong. The attitude which should lead the Churches to witness together to God's marvel is a disposition of benevolent understanding. Such understanding strives to find the deep meaning in christological doctrine, above the different formulas, concepts or even sensibilities in which it has been formulated. If the Greek tradition, for instance, may be characterised by its speculative tendencies and accurate terminology, the Syriac one is oriented to a lyric and contemplative attitude. Not only are both complementary, but they are also necessary to each other, and should be a source of gratefulness and marvel

### **The mystery of Christ as mystically shared in the sacraments**

At the end of his earthly life, Jesus told us that he would not leave us orphans, but that he would send us another Comforter. The coming of the Holy Spirit is then the extension of the incarnation, and, in the “Last times”, substitutes Him as the acting power in history. He is the medium of our effective sanctification, the realisation of salvation that is potentially operated for the whole of humanity through the word's incarnation, death and resurrection. In other words, the Church should be consubstantial to the Holy Spirit. The Church is either charismatic or it is not. The Spirit blows wherever it pleases, and we ought to discern its signs, which are sometimes surprising and unexpected, throughout history. However, the usual medium of his action within the Church is the sacramental life. Let's not understand this expression merely as the scholastic list of the seven sacraments. Once again, the Holy Spirit's field of action cannot be limited in any way. But the sacramental life in its broad meaning is nothing other than the extension of the incarnation, that is to say, the insertion of God's saving and divinising activity into the very core of our daily life. As St John of Damascus expresses it:

*«I am not prostrating myself before matter, but before the Creator of matter, who became matter for me, who accepted to live in matter and who accomplished my salvation through matter (...) I also venerate and respect the other elements of matter through which my salvation occurred, inasmuch as they are filled with grace and divine energy? Is the thrice-blessed wood of the cross not matter? Is the venerable and holy mountain of Calvary not matter? Is the life-bearing and nourishing stone, the Holy Sepulchre, the source of our resurrection, not matter? Is the ink of the most holy Gospel not matter? Is the life-bearing altar, which offers us the living bread, not matter? Is the gold and silver from which crosses, chalices and patens are made, not matter? And most of all, is the body of my Saviour and his blood not matter?»<sup>1</sup>*

This final mention of the Eucharist is essential to rightly understand this text. If the life of the Church is the extension of the incarnation, the new model of Christ's presence in humanity is the Eucharist, his body and blood given for us, the radiant place of every possible sacramental life. But the body of Christ is by no means confined to the tabernacle, nor limited to our Sunday celebrations, which are nevertheless the heart where all the fullness of the Church is manifested. Conversely, the Eucharistic body is called to accompany every human activity, in order to penetrate all things by his grace. That is to say that nothing is profane for a Christian. Every reality of this world, every work we undertake is able to be transfigured by the *epiclesis* of the Holy Spirit.

This sacramental vision of the Church includes the conception of the ministries, which are never to be considered outside of the context of the local community, being a proper service to it, according to its etymology from the latin word *minus*: “servant”. The Church is neither a monarchy (where the hierarchy would dominate the assembly), nor a democracy (where the assembly would dominate the hierarchy), but the communion of both elements. God does not bring into existence a hierarchy, but an assembly from which a hierarchy emerges. Their relationship is in no way a power balance, but a mutual sacrificial love. Indeed, the ministers are “fathers and pastors” of the community, but they must in some way be approved by it, directly or indirectly.

### **The mystery of Christ as spiritually experienced by each of the faithful**

From its very beginning, the Church confronted a dilemma that had never been solved in history, and probably will never be: the balance between the prophetic and the institutional, between charism and order, between personal spirituality and collective church life. But this unavoidable tension bears fruits by its very nature. However, the ecclesiastical tradition had always stated that an external adhesion to the Church, and an active participation in its activities is not enough. The grace of baptism is not an asset, which indeed would allow us to live, but would remain external to our very being. This grace

ought to be assimilated and appropriated by each member of the faithful, just as the universal salvation performed by Christ needs a personal adhesion, an “Amen”, to become effective. This appropriation of baptismal grace has been highly stressed both in the byzantine and the syriac tradition. Lets just mention the name of Symeon the New Theologian. Philoxenus of Mabboug, on his side, uses the beautiful expression of “baptism of will”, which is expected to fulfil the “baptism of grace”. Of course, the Church will never be made up exclusively of prophets and saints (“Lord, have mercy on us !”), but she must encourage by every means each of her members to progress, ever so little, on the path of personal sanctification, in order to bring out some spiritual fruit which would be like the blossoming of his baptism. In this regard, looking back to the history of the Church, one can say that, at almost every time and in almost every place, the task always has been, be and will remain huge ! Too often, membership in the Church is a function of social identity, without any real ethical or spiritual requirement. In other words, we have to deal with baptised, but not evangelised people. To remedy this abnormal situation, we must start from the base, that is to raise up living parishes, where each Eucharistic assembly would manifest the fullness of the Church. To reach this goal, it is necessary first to develop a catechesis based on the liturgy. Indeed, the Eastern Christian liturgies present an admirable catechetical value, and therefore offer an ideal starting point for the transmission, to the Christian people, of the abundance of the “fullness of God” (Eph 3, 19). It is self-evident that, in this regard, the liturgy should be first understood by the faithful. But we also ought to explain its structure and develop its richness, particularly through the liturgical year and the feasts of the Lord. Since this catechesis cannot be a pre-baptismal one, as it was in the early Church, it should be offered within the frame of an adult-training network, which could be thoroughly elaborated, for those who would wish, through biblical study groups or others.

Last but not least, it seems that the existence of monastic life is of prime importance for the Churches. Monasticism, as a testimony to the eschatological nature of the Church, has always been the very heart of the Eastern Churches' life. A monastic community is a natural point of reference for the whole Christian people, and could be a privileged place for Church studies, where the Christian tradition would be lived as well as studied.

### **The mystery of Christ as socially realised in the community of the faithful**

The Eucharistic life of the Church ought to bloom in many ways, drawing from its source the liturgical celebration and then having its extension in the social reality of the world. On an individual level, it should promote the ceaseless conversion of each believer and his spiritual growth, according to his own rhythm and abilities. On the collective level, social concern constitutes its natural extension. The Christian life should not be partitioned. Everything comes from the same and unique source, the life-giving side of our Lord, which bestows upon us the blood of the new covenant and the water of the Spirit, grace and forgiveness. That is why, as it was in the early times, the social activity of the Church should be flowing out from the Eucharistic table. It should first be expressed *ad intra* through a genuine fraternity, each local community becoming a natural place of brotherly mutual aid and support. But it also may and should radiate *ad extra*. Let us listen to the words of St John Chrysostom, who shows a similarity between the poor, neglected people and the Eucharist placed on the altar during the celebration:

*«You wish to honour the Saviour's body? Do not turn away from him when he is naked. Do not adorn it with silk garments, though you abandon him outside, lying naked and chilled with cold. For the same who said: 'this is my body' and realised the transformation by the power of his word, this one also said: 'whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for*

*me'. Honour it, therefore, in sharing your goods with the poor, for God is expecting golden souls, and not golden chalices.»<sup>2</sup>*

It appears clearly that such a manifestation of divine charity bears an individual aspect. Being a reflection of God's "agape", it is necessarily expressed through a personal relationship. But this does not prevent us from fighting the causes of poverty, and therefore the unjust structures of this world. It is an endless battle, but it cannot be avoided. It faces Christians with a redoubtable challenge as far as the means are concerned. Of course, there are no overall solutions, but it seems right to set *a priori* an ethical principle concerning the method of this fight. According to the Gospel, it should be an exclusively active and non-violent fight, which is the only way consistent with Jesus' "New Law".

Another crucial point to be found in the social activity of the Church is ecology. This concern is simply good sense: we have only one earth and it should carry us, throughout history, into the arms of God. It would therefore be both stupid and suicidal to exhaust it. But another imperative can be deduced from biblical teaching. God granted us to be managers and gardeners of his creation, not its tyrants. The relationship of radical non-violence which lies in the very heart of the Gospel is not limited to human intercourse, but is to be extended to the whole creation, for it shares our vocation to be glorified in God. Being interdependent with us and therefore sharing our corruption - or rather being a victim of our corruption and covetousness - it is called also to share our glorification. In this regard, ecology is also an extension of the Eucharist and is directly connected to the very heart of our faith: the incarnation. Creation, too, matters, as St John of Damascus would say, and has been impregnated with divinity through the life-giving incarnation of the Word. *"For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."* (Rom. 8,20-23). It could not be expressed better.

### **The mystery of Christ as eschatologically accomplished in the kingdom of god**

This spreading out of Eucharistic life is neither insignificant nor optional. It is simply a normal dimension of ecclesial existence, which would be incomplete or crippled without it. Yet, this should not diminish the fact that, following the Word of God (Jn 1,14), we live here below but in a "tent", confessing that we are *"aliens and strangers on earth"* (Heb. 11,13). Hence the difficult balance of Christian life, where we ought to live in this world as if not engrossed in it (1Cor. 7,31). Once again, this does not diminish the necessity for a Christian to work in the world, and for any Church to operate within its own cultural *milieu*. Instead and paradoxically, this otherworldliness may become the source of a more prophetic and effective action, for the backward outlook it engenders allows us to avoid much alienation and blindness.

Moreover, we have to grasp its deep logic. The work of the Christians in the world is nothing but the anticipated testimony about the world to come. Every Church, every single Eucharistic community is bound to make present, as much as is possible here below, the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem. In doing so, they manifest the true nature and vocation of the whole of humanity. That is precisely why the evidence of brotherly charity and liturgical beauty are so important: they are nothing but a reflection of this reality we long for. The Church exists for the whole of humanity and lives on its behalf, in order to be the yeast in the flour, manifesting itself as the first fruits of the only accomplished reality: the Kingdom Of God - the existence of this world being transitory. The royal priesthood of the

baptised mainly assumes an eschatological function since, when Christ will be “all and in all”, those who are saved will partake of the Trinitarian life in its fullness.

## **Conclusion**

These are some of the characteristics or qualities which build a full ecclesial existence. This being said. One must add that the Church is neither an abstraction nor a generality. It exists only as a particular body. The different ways of living the one mystery of the Church are not a concession to antiquity, or mere stubbornness! This diversity is an essential, ontological component of catholicity. Far from being opposed to unity, and in particular to the indispensable Petrine ministry, it constitutes its very basis and substance.

Therefore, any local Church is called to embody, in its proper and irreplaceable way, the “*eternal purpose that God accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Eph. 3,11). She has been granted for that an abundance of richness, which can be multiplied by the creativity of the Holy Spirit. It is just left to her to “*drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well*” (Prov. 5,15).

## **Endnotes**

- 1 John of Damascus, First Discourse on the Holy Icons, 16.
- 2 John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, 50,3.

Hieromonk Elisha  
From the collective *opus*:  
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