

Supplément au SOP n° 77, avril 1983

UNITY IN DIVERSITY :

THE ORTHODOX VOCATION IN WESTERN EUROPE

Address given by Bishop KALLISTOS (Ware)  
in the Institut Saint-Serge, Paris,  
on 13 March 1983

Document 77.B

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by  
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Diversity as a gift from God

In our reflection together on the burning issue of Orthodox unity here in Western Europe, let us begin with some words of the first dean of the Institut St-Serge, Archpriest Sergei Bulgakov. Unity, he used to say, is at the same time 'already given' and yet an objective towards which we are still striving.<sup>1</sup> He was referring to unity between separated Christian communions, but his words apply equally to unity within the one Orthodox Church. For us Orthodox Christians in the Western world today, Orthodox unity is both a reality and a task, both a present fact and an unfulfilled vocation. We are to hold in balance the 'already' and the 'not yet'. We know that we are indeed one, but we see that the visible manifestation of our unity is lamentably incomplete.

Our aim, however, is not just unity in the sense of monolithic uniformity, but unity-in-diversity. There is a passage in the Life of St Antony by St Athanasius, which fits our present situation. At the start of his monastic training, the young Antony used to go with his spiritual father's blessing to visit other ascetics in the neighbourhood. Like a bee moving from flower to flower, says his biographer, Antony sought to discover the particular gift of grace that each elder possessed, the distinctive lesson that each was able to impart, adding this to his secret store of honey. From one he learnt the value of ascetic self-denial, from another zeal in prayer, from a third freedom from anger, from a fourth loving compassion.<sup>2</sup> So,

through the diversity of his spiritual experience, he grew to inward maturity and prepared himself for solitude.

In Western Europe today, we have the same kind of opportunity as was offered to the young Antony. The wide variety of national and cultural backgrounds among Orthodox in France, Britain and elsewhere is not so much a problem as a privilege and an enrichment. It forms part of our moment of opportunity, our kairos, as Orthodox in the twentieth century. The existence of parallel jurisdictions is indeed a grave canonical anomaly, but it has also a positive aspect. As a British convert to Orthodoxy, I count it a blessing that in my own country I have been able to learn from Orthodox of so many different traditions: not only from Greeks, but from Russians, both of the Moscow Patriarchate and of the Russian Church in Exile, from Serbs, Romanians, Bulgarians and Arabs. Like St Antony of Egypt going from one monastic cell to another, from each I have been able to learn something distinctive about the one Orthodox faith.

#### Nationhood and Catholicity

It is surely one of the special glories of Orthodoxy that it honours the identity and specific gifts of each nation. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn has so rightly affirmed, 'Nations are the wealth of mankind, its collective personalities. The very least of them wears its own special colours and bears within itself a special facet of divine intention.'<sup>3</sup> At his Incarnation Christ came to heal and save all humankind, but at the same time he was made man in a particular country, as a member of a specific people; and in this way through his Incarnation he blesses the distinct identity of every nation. Likewise at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended in the tongues of the different nations.

The apostles did not speak in Esperanto, but each in his own language; variety was not obliterated, and so Pentecost reaffirms the plurality of national paths to a single goal. For the Christian nationhood is not pointless but providential, a level in the divinely-<sup>ordained</sup>~~appointed~~ hierarchy of the cosmos.

Yet our diversity is to be at the same time a diversity in unity. While honouring ethnic identity, we are not to forget that the Church in its fundamental essence is one and catholic. The primary structure of the Church on earth is not the nation but the local eucharistic assembly, meeting Sunday by Sunday around the bishop for the celebration of the Holy Mysteries; and this eucharistic assembly should unite all the Christians in a particular place, irrespective of their national origin. In the Holy Canons the diocesan bishop has charge not of a national group but of a defined territory. <sup>As a eucharistic society</sup> The Church is organized not on an ethnic but on a territorial basis.

This means that nationhood must be the handmaid, not the mistress, of the Church. How, then, can the Church make its own the riches of nationhood, while yet escaping domination by them? Such is the challenge before us: to use, and yet to remain free.

### Ikon of the Holy Trinity

As guide and touchstone in our practical problems, let us keep clearly in mind two ecclesial models. The Church is an ikon of the Holy Trinity and the Body of Christ. Both models emphasize the true character of the Church as a unity-in-diversity.

Ikon of the Holy Trinity. We Christians believe not simply in one God but in God who is one-in-three. Our God is not just

a unit but a union, not just unity but community. There is in him true diversity as well as genuine oneness. God is not a single person, loving himself alone, but from all eternity he knows himself as Father, Son and Spirit, three persons loving one another.

As ikon of the Trinity, the Church is called to reproduce on a human plane <sup>e</sup> the ~~the~~ unceasing movement of love <sup>that exists</sup> in the heavenly places. Christ speaks clearly of this at the Last Supper in his high-priestly prayer to the Father: 'The glory that thou gavest me, I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, may they be perfectly one' (John 17:22-23). The same approach is to be found in St Ignatius of Antioch,<sup>4</sup> in the 34th Apostolic Canon, and in the deacon's acclamation before the Creed during the Divine Liturgy: 'Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Trinity one in essence and undivided.'

Such, then, is our first model. As God is unity-in-diversity, so also is the Church. In the Trinity the three persons constitute one God, yet each is authentically personal; in the Church a multitude of human persons is united into a single communion, yet each retains unimpaired his personal and also his ethnic identity. There is unity but no uniformity - harmony without totalitarianism, freedom without anarchy.

#### One Body with many limbs

Our second model, the Church as Body of Christ, is equally an instance of unity-in-diversity. In 1 Corinthians, chapters 10-12, St Paul takes first the eucharistic sense of the phrase.

'The bread which we break,' he asks, 'is it not a communion in the body of Christ? The fact that there is only one loaf means that, though there are many of us, we form a single body, because we all share in this one loaf' (10:16-17). Here the apostle asserts an analogy between the one eucharistic loaf and the one ecclesial community - and not an analogy only but a causal connection: because we eat from the one loaf that is Christ's Body, therefore we all form one Body in Christ. The Eucharist creates the unity of the Church. Unity is not imposed from without by higher authority, but actualized from within through sharing in the sacraments.

Pursuing his analogy, St Paul shifts from his image of the one eucharistic loaf to the idea of a single human body with many limbs. 'Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (12:12). He develops the comparison in two ways. First, all the limbs are interdependent: each needs the others and none can exist in isolation, for the parts have no meaning except within the context of the whole (12:15-16). ~~Without the unity of the~~ Without the unity of the parts, there can be no human body; equally, without unity there can be no Church. Second, the limbs are different: foot, hand, ear and eye are not interchangeable but have each their own function (12:17-19). Without diversity there can be no human body; equally, without diversity there can be no Church. Thus, in the second as in the first model, the Church is seen as a sacrament of unity-in-diversity: unity without uniformity, diversity without fragmentation.

Such, then, is our vocation, our kairos, as Orthodox in Western Europe: to safeguard the personal freedom of each of Christ's 'little ones', down to the very least, to preserve the varied treasures of our national traditions, and yet to be -visibly, canonically, eucharistically, personally - one living Body in Christ.

### Diaspora?

With these ruling models or theological ikons in view, let us turn to the practical and pastoral situation in Western Europe, viewing it briefly under five headings.

First, let us cease to think or speak of ourselves as a 'diaspora'. Such a term suggests that our faithful are no more than temporary immigrants, expecting shortly to return to their mother country, whereas in reality an increasing number belong to the second generation, born and brought up in the West. In many places, indeed, the decisive point of transition between the first and the second generation has long since slipped by, and there can be no return to the past. Our concern is no longer with a transient 'diaspora', but with the definitive emergence in different lands of a local Orthodox Church, which - so we hope and expect - will become in due course autonomous or autocephalous.

Should we delay the creation of such local Orthodox Churches, in the hope of an eventual reunion with the Christian communions historically 'established' in Western Europe?

Surely this is unrealistic. Reunion will prove a complex and arduous process, for ~~in the relations of Orthodoxy alike with~~ <sup>with</sup> ~~with~~ <sup>with</sup> Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Protestants - there are grave dogmatic problems that remain unsolved. As Father Georges Florovsky used to say, one of the

chief ecumenical virtues is patience. Meanwhile, we Orthodox are faced by our own domestic problems, of vital urgency. While fully committed to a dialogue of love and of theology with other Christians, let us at the same time set our own church life in the West upon a firm basis. This, indeed, is precisely the most effective contribution that we Orthodox can make at this juncture to the ecumenical movement - to be more united among ourselves. Let us begin with an 'Orthodox ecumenism'. 'First take the beam out of your own eye ...' (Matt. 7:5).

### The Great Council

We should speak, then, not of a 'diaspora' but of emerging local Church<sup>(es)</sup>. This brings us to a second point: in the evolution of these new Churches, what part do we expect to be played by the 'Holy and Great Council', for which we have been so long preparing?

Let us continue to hope that, in our own lifetime, we shall witness the convening of a genuinely pan-Orthodox synod, free from political pressures, which will prove to be - in the words of Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland - 'a major historical event for the Church, possibly even for mankind, and a privilege of our generation'.<sup>5</sup> But, more especially since the meeting of the Second Preconciliar Conference last September, it is evident that the process of preparation is still far from complete.

Are we then to wait in the interim passive and inert? By no means. A pan-Orthodox gathering at the highest level may indeed succeed in speaking the word of fire and life that will bring order out of our canonical confusion. But, while awaiting help from above, let us also set to work from below. Solutions



do not come like/<sup>summer</sup>lightning out of an empty sky. We are not to treat the Great Council as a magic talisman, a deus ex machina, capable of conjuring from nothing an answer to all our perplexities. None can set bounds to what the Holy Spirit may achieve at a true council after the likeness of Pentecost; but until we learn to trust and love each other at a parish and diocesan level, it is difficult to imagine what possible solution the Great Council can in fact propose.

Let us not forget that neither an Ecumenical Council nor the Ecumenical Patriarchate nor the Mother Church can create a new autocephalous Church. The most that any of them can do is to recognize such a Church. But the specific act of creation needs to take place locally, on the spot. The higher church authorities can guide, test, confirm and proclaim. The creative work, however, can only be done on the local level, by the living eucharistic cells that constitute the emerging autocephalous body.

#### The recognition of autocephaly

But whose responsibility is it to recognize a new autocephalous Church? Is it the prerogative of each Mother Church, or only of the Ecumenical Throne? That is the third point on my agenda. Concerning this complicated and delicate subject I wish to make merely a single observation.

It is commonly assumed that there is a polarity between the Second and the Third Rome, with Constantinople insisting on the exclusive right of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to grant autocephaly, and with Moscow upholding the <sup>exclusive</sup> claims of each Mother Church. But, here as elsewhere, the wise maxim of the late

Patriarch Athenagoras should not be forgotten: 'It is false to reduce the situation of Orthodoxy to the duality of Constantinople and Moscow.'<sup>6</sup>

For in fact the divergence of views is far less sharp than at first appears. Patriarch Athenagoras, for example, in his letter of 24 June 1970 on American autocephaly,<sup>7</sup> maintains that a final and definitive grant of autocephaly can only be made by the Orthodox Church as a whole, acting <sup>at</sup> ~~in~~ an Ecumenical Council. But at the same time he assigns to each Mother Church the responsibility to take the initiative: it is the task of the local synod of the Mother Church to consider in the first instance whether the arguments advanced in favour of autocephaly are worthy of acceptance. In this way the Mother Church's blessing forms an essential part of the process.

Let us turn now to a Russian authority, Professor A.A. Bogolepov, the main spokesman on canonical questions in the American Metropolia before and during the autocephaly debate in 1970. In his book Towards an American Orthodox Church (New York 1963), Bogolepov underlines, as we should expect, the rights of the Mother Church. But he qualifies this by observing that the recognition of autocephaly on the part of the Mother Church needs to be 'received' by all the other autocephalous Churches; and in this process of reception, so he insists, a special part is played by the Ecumenical Throne as first among equals in the worldwide Orthodox communion. The establishment of a new autocephalous Church, he says, is of common concern to the whole family of sister Churches, and therefore requires a pan-Orthodox consensus.<sup>8</sup>

Are the Greek Patriarch and the Russian Professor so very far apart? Between them there is an evident difference of emphasis, but not an extreme polarization. The Patriarch, as well as the Professor, allows to the Mother Church the responsibility of taking the initiative; and the Professor, as well as the Patriarch, <sup>(now)</sup> acknowledges the need for a pan-Orthodox consensus, and in particular for approval by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. According to both of them, neither the Mother Church nor the Ecumenical Patriarchate acts in isolation; it is a matter not of exclusive rights but of mutual interdependence.

From plurality to unity: a map of the country

The creation of a new autocephalous Church, it was said, must take place locally; we are to work from below. But how are we to advance? By what stages is the transition to be made from jurisdictional pluralism to a single local Church? Let me attempt - and this is the fourth of my five points - to suggest an outline map of the country that we have to traverse. It is no more than a sketch, but it may give us a sense of direction. Three successive stages may be envisaged:

(1) First, there is the situation where different Orthodox jurisdictions exist side by side in the same area without possessing any official organ of co-operation. Friendly contacts exist between individuals, but without any formal authority or institutional structure. Such, for instance, was the case in Great Britain until as recently as 1979, when for the first time a modest organ of co-operation emerged in the form of the Orthodox Fellowship of St John the Baptist.

(2) At the second stage there exists co-operation on a semi-official level: certain interjurisdictional organizations

are established, with the blessing of the bishops, but without being given formal canonical status. Such is the situation in France, with the interepiscopal committee, <sup>an Orthodox Fraternity at the national level</sup> and ~~the~~ three regional fraternities; and also in the United States, with the 'Standing Conference' of bishops, with fraternities of priests in many areas, and a large number of local 'Orthodox Christian Fellowships'. In Britain we have only an Orthodox fraternity, but as yet no interepiscopal committee. These semi-official organizations can thus exist on three levels: that of the bishops, that of the priests, and that of clergy and laity together.

(3) Thirdly and finally, there comes a time - so we may hope - when the semi-official interepiscopal committee transforms itself into a canonical local synod, <sup>possessing the</sup> ~~with~~ power to elect bishops to vacant sees, with the participation of the clergy and laity of the diocese. The process of transformation could perhaps occur in two steps:

(i) At first dioceses continue to possess, to a greater or lesser degree, an ethnic character, and they overlap geographically. All the bishops, however, sit together in a single local synod.

(ii) Eventually, by God's grace, the moment comes when each diocese can be organized on a fully territorial basis, with precise boundaries. But individual parishes within a diocese may still continue <sup>to</sup> for some time longer to possess a distinctive ethnic character, using various languages, and even following different calendars.

The local synod might initially be autonomous, under the omophorion of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 'Mother and first among the local Orthodox Churches', in the words of the late

Patriarch Athenagoras, 'and the centre of their inner unity'.<sup>9</sup>  
 But so long as individual dioceses continue to possess an ethnic character, <sup>(each of)</sup> the different bishops might also preserve certain canonical links <sup>(if the Mother Church in question desired this.)</sup> with his own Mother Church, So far as I know, there is no exact canonical precedent for dual jurisdiction of this kind; but then equally there is no exact precedent for the massive emigration of faithful from the traditional Orthodox countries in this century, and so we should not be afraid to look for new solutions. Once the change from ethnic to territorial dioceses has been achieved, the need for dual jurisdiction would cease to exist, and the local Church might in principle be recognized as autocephalous.

Obviously the crucial point of transition is from the second to the third of the three stages indicated above. Almost everywhere in Western Europe where Orthodox exist side by side in large numbers, we have already passed beyond the first stage of purely informal contacts. But how are we to advance from semi-official committees to a fully canonical episcopal synod? That is the distinctive task that confronts all of us in Western Europe during the next twenty years. May the Paraclete give us prudence and courage!

My immediate neighbour ....

In our work from below, let us start by co-operating with <sup>see graphically</sup> those closest to us, let us try to be specific and practical, and let us act now. That is my fifth and last point.

The future Mother Maria (Skobtsova), martyr in the gas chambers at Ravensbrück, went once <sup>as a child</sup> to talk with Konstantin Pobedonostsev, friend of her family and Chief Procurator of

the Holy Synod. 'Konstantin Petrovich,' she asked him, 'what is truth?' 'The truth lies in love, of course', he replied. 'But there are many people who think that the truth lies in love for distant people. Love for distant people is no love. If only everyone loved his neighbour, his immediate neighbour.'<sup>10</sup> In a particular way this applies to our work for Orthodox unity. Instead of forming unrealistic schemes for worldwide unity, let us each begin by loving and serving our immediate neighbour - our fellow Orthodox in the same city, in the parishes nearest to our own, whether or not they are of the same ethnic background as our own. Needless to say, as Orthodox in the West we are here to serve not just each other but the non-Orthodox around us: my neighbour, as the Good Samaritan recognized, means everyone who is in need.

And let our love be not sentimental but practical. Not long ago, reading the memoirs of Sophie Koulomzine, Many Worlds, I was especially struck by her account of work for Orthodox education in America. She came to realize, she says, that 'any efforts at improving the religious education of our children and young people must be made along the lines of our common faith and not our different national backgrounds.' On this basis she set to work in the late 1950s:

During this period we attained the best inter-Orthodox co-operation I had ever experienced. Church groups that did not even recognize each other's canonical status worked together. All the typing and reproduction was contributed by the Religious Education Department of the Greek Archdiocese; Federated Russian Orthodox Clubs contributed the small amounts of money we needed. A Ukrainian priest [acted] as our secretary.... We were helped at a moment of our lowest ebb by [a priest] of the Romanian diocese.<sup>11</sup>

These people worked together, not just because they shared a theoretical vision of Orthodox unity, but because they saw an urgent task that needed doing, and decided to do it together. They were specific and practical, and so their efforts were blessed.

Our Orthodox experience at Oxford over the past twenty years has been similar. Canonically we are two distinct parishes, Greek and Russian, but in practice we form one worshipping community, with a single Divine Liturgy each Sunday supported by both parishes together; and together we have built a church used by the two parishes on an equal basis. All this has come about, not as a result of some abstract theory of unity, but because we grew accustomed <sup>in practice</sup> to praying together; shared worship led to mutual love and trust, and we discovered in specific ways how much we stood to gain by co-operating.

Let us be practical, then, and let us also act now. The devil says to us, 'Tom<sup>o</sup>rrow'; but God says, 'Today'. Once the apostle of Alaska, St Gherman of Spruce Island, was invited on board a passing Russian ship to dine with the officers. The conversation turned to the purpose of human life, and each spoke in turn about the thing for which he cared the most. Finally it was St Gherman's turn. 'Let me beg this of you, my friends', he said. 'From this day forward, from this hour, from this minute, let us love God above all.'<sup>12</sup> Note the urgency of the appeal: from this day, from this hour, from this minute. We are to love God, not in the distant future, not at some other time, but here and now, at this very moment. Let us apply the point to our work for unity. <sup>Tomorrow may be too late.)</sup> 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2).

A continual miracle

'The Eucharist is a continual miracle', affirms St John of Kronstadt. And the Church, as a eucharistic organism, is likewise a continual miracle. Beyond all the problems of our church structures, beyond all our canonical and jurisdictional misunderstandings, let us never lose sight of the miracle and mystery of the Church: how, despite human failings, the Church remains always God with us, the ikon of the Holy Trinity.)

(During the coming Lent let us renew our sense of wonder and gratitude before this living miracle, and let us strive to become more fully that which we already are: one Body in Christ.



## Notes

\* Address given to the Fraternité Orthodoxe en Europe Occidentale in the Institut de Théologie Orthodoxe Saint-Serge, Paris, on 13 March 1983.

<sup>1</sup> 'By Jacob's Well', in S. Bulgakov, A Bulgakov Anthology, ed. J. Pain and N. Zernov (London 1976), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> The Life of Antony, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Nobel Prize Speech (1970). Compare the development of this theme by Vadim Borisov, 'Personality and National Awareness', in A. Solzhenitsyn, From Under the Rubble (London 1975).

<sup>4</sup> To the Magnesians, vii, 1.

<sup>5</sup> 'Towards the Great and Holy Council', The Greek Orthodox Review xxiv, 2-3 (1979), p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> O. Clément, Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athénagoras (Paris 1969), p. 522. (12)

<sup>7</sup> In Episkepsis, 18 August 1970.

<sup>8</sup> See especially pp. 26, 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> See his letter of 24 June 1970, in Episkepsis, 18 August 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Sergei Hackel, One, of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova (London 1965), p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Many Worlds: A Russian Life (New York 1980), pp. 298-300.

<sup>12</sup> F.A. Golder, 'Father Herman, Alaska's Saint', The Orthodox Word i, 2 (1965), p. 12.