

Local Church in the Global World

Orthodox Ecclesiology in the Age of Pluralism

Vladimir Latinovic

University of Tübingen, Germany

vladimir.latinovic@me.com

Abstract

This article gives a brief chronological overview of developments in Orthodox ecclesiology and then focuses on the last phase of this development, so-called 'national ecclesiology', which is the current Orthodox ecclesiological model. In the article, national ecclesiology is identified as one of the main sources of the problems which this church faces today. National ecclesiology is blamed for disabling the Orthodox churches from satisfactorily responding to the demands of the modern age, and for inhibiting her adaptation to the globalized pluralistic world. The author also attempts to give an answer to the question of what needs to be done in order to modernize Orthodox ecclesiology.

Keywords

Orthodox – ecclesiology – secular – nationalism – globalisation – synodality – ecumenism – diaspora

Introduction

In his study 'The Church Which Presides in Love', Nicholas Afanasieff reduces all ecclesiologies to two fundamental types: universal and eucharistic.¹ The first type, the universal, sees the church as a single organism that includes within itself smaller units, such as dioceses and parishes, which are all regarded as

1 See Nicholas Afanasieff, '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), p. 92.

parts of one, universal Church.² This type of ecclesiology is, according to Afanasieff, prevalent from the second half of the third century onwards, and is still the official ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church.³ In this model, the local church exists solely as a manifestation of the universal Church and is considered to be catholic only as long as she remains in communion with her centre, in this case Rome.

Opposed to this model, eucharistic ecclesiology sees the fullness of the Church of God in Christ in every single local church, drawing legitimacy not so much from maintaining communion with the centre as from staying connected to all other local churches. Rather than undermining the unity of the Church of God, the plurality of these local churches preserves its unity, just like, in Afanasieff's words, 'la multitude des assemblées locales ne porte pas atteinte à l'unité de l'Eucharistie'.⁴ This analogy with the Eucharist is the reason why this ecclesiology is called 'eucharistic' in the first place. According to Afanasieff, eucharistic ecclesiology is the oldest ecclesiological model and came into being long before the universal one. In his view, this model is (at least in theory) the authentic Orthodox ecclesiology, although (in praxis) in some cases Orthodox ecclesiology 'follow[s] Catholic doctrine and accepts universal ecclesiology as an axiom'.⁵

We could probably let Afanasieff's statement stand were there not some other opposing statements. When the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* marked its half century of existence, its President, Cardinal Kurt Koch, stated that the very heart of the ecumenical problems between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches lies in the fact that the Orthodox 'ecclesiology [is] linked to the national culture and a Catholic ecclesiology [is] oriented to the concept of universality'.⁶ Contrary to Afanasieff's more theoretical claims, Koch, as well as many other Western theologians,

² Afanasieff, 'The Church', p. 93.

³ Roman Catholic ecclesiology also changed since the time he was writing his study. The Second Vatican Council introduced significant elements of eucharistic ecclesiology into the Roman Catholic Church. See Massimo Faggioli, *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), pp. 6, 15, 18, 71.

⁴ See Nicholas Afanasieff, 'L'apôtre Pierre et l'évêque de Rome', *Theologia*, 26 (1955), pp. 620–41, at p. 628.

⁵ Afanasieff, 'The church Which Presides in Love', p. 92. The idea that the Orthodox school theology is 'imprisoned' by Western thought is something common to most members of so-called 'Paris school of Orthodox theology'. See John. A. Jillions, 'Ecumenism and the Paris School of Orthodox Theology', *Theoforum* 39 (2008), pp. 141–74.

⁶ 'Are We Getting Anywhere with Ecumenism?', Cardinal Kurt Koch, accessed 29 May 2015, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/are-we-getting-anywhere-with-ecumenism>.