

The Translation of the Parish across Borders and Cultures

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Any collection of papers on the Eucharist – which is the foundation of the Church – would not be complete if we did not look at the actual communities that celebrate. Those communities, our parishes, are ‘the cells of worship life’ and it is in them that we discover the “catholic” – the completeness – in our experience that allows to understand the wider church but that the diocese or the oikumene. So if there is to be eucharistic sharing, it requires us to think about this reality: the parish and how people relate within it. This essay is a contribution to this reflection and calls us to recognise that while theologians “think global,” Christians “act local.” – Thomas O’Loughlin.

In traditional ecclesiology, the experience of the local church is a fundamental concept. Quite often, especially in episcopal churches, “local church” as an entity, is understood at the level of the diocese – and to that effect there is a long tradition in Orthodox ecclesiology that makes this point, which perhaps is culminated in the work of John Zizioulas.¹ On the other hand, the distance between the diocese and the parish as cells of the worship life has not been addressed adequately, and I believe that this largely reflects the distance between worship as experience – which is what defines the life of the parish – and worship as administration – especially in our times, when while it may be hard enough to defend the diocese as defined by the sense of community, when that happens in a mid-size city, and yet we see bishops whose administrative responsibility covers entire countries, in some cases more than one: the title Metropolitan of Western and Southern Europe is used by the Romanian Church at the moment.²

Be that as it may, the principle of the early Christian experience of the presence of Jesus Christ is strongly communal, as we see it in Matthew 18:20 where the meeting of “two or three in my name” constitutes the divine presence, in the “all together in one place” (ομοθυμαδόν και εν τω αυτώ), which in Acts 2:1 appears as the prerequisite for the descent of the Holy Spirit in

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¹ See: John Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 2001), a theme that he first examined in his doctoral dissertation in 1965.

² <http://www.mitropolia-paris.ro/>, accessed November 5, 2021.

Pentecost, and even more strongly in apostolic Fathers such as Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch, who describe the gatherings of the early Church.³ Without getting into the question of bishop versus priest here, this immediacy of a worshipping community that had the feel and the size of no more than an extended family (a principle that is still observed in many places in relation to the members of a monastic community) supports the parish, rather than the diocese, as the cell and constituent element of the life of the Church. After all, Aristotle describes the city as the cell of society, as a community that should be large enough to be self-sufficient, but small enough so as to accommodate the participation of all of its citizens in a gathering: the number of the citizens should be such that they all know each other.⁴ In this political analogy, we can see that the concept of the ancient city as the cell of participation in shared political life, which defines, through the shared λόγος, what κοινωνία as society is, corresponds to the parish, which likewise is the cell of shared sacramental life and thus defines κοινωνία as communion with the divine Λόγος. On the other hand, the larger political organization of the ἔθνος/nation, which is defined by shared descent, shared ways and shared religion, and is based on the communion of the cities, corresponds to the larger ecclesiastical structure of the diocese.⁵

The same argument of parish over diocese can be easily drawn within the tradition of sacramental theology. Nevertheless, while many theologians have championed the centrality of the Eucharist for Christian ecclesiology, they have done so mostly at the level of the diocese, ignoring the fact that for the vast majority of the people, the Eucharist is celebrated and experienced at the level of the parish, presided by a priest instead of a bishop – technically in the name of the bishop, who is after all commemorated by the priest,

³ For Ignatius of Antioch note especially section 4 (p 65-66) in John Romanides, “The Ecclesiology of Ignatius of Antioch”, in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 7 no 1-2 (Summer–Winter 1961–1962): 53–77.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* 1326b, 14–18.

⁵ There is an ongoing conversation among modern Orthodox theologians concerning the concept of nation in modern ecclesiology and whether it has inherited the significance of Empire, or whether it may be seen under the distinction of people of God versus gentile nations. For two different ecclesiological lines in antiquity as well as in modern Orthodox theology, Andrew Louth, “Ignatios or Eusebios: two models of patristic ecclesiology”, in *International journal for the study of the Christian church*, Vol.10 (January 2010): 46-56. This is still a difficult topic in modern Orthodox ecclesiology, as the practice of establishing parallel ethnic episcopal jurisdiction in countries that were not traditionally Orthodox is problematic, to say the least. There is some relevant material in the way the modern Orthodox Church tries to deal with ethnocentrism, such as in the comments of the Council of Crete on the question of the Diaspora, but the dominance of ethnic lines in what is problematically still called the “Diaspora” remains.

but despite the episcopocentric strand in Orthodox theology, suggested by the signature of the bishop on the antimimension and the commemoration of the bishop, the presence of the bishop is not part of the usual, Sunday-to-Sunday experience of the people, who recognize the priest, rather than the bishop, as their immediate spiritual father. The *fermentum*, the sharing of a particle of the episcopal chalice with the priestly chalice, which is sometimes mentioned as a sign of this connection, notably by Metropolitan John Zizioulas, has not been practiced for many centuries. It is noteworthy that Metropolitan John sees the emergence of the parish as something of a rupture in eucharistic theology,⁶ not being fully able to account for the distance between the parish and the diocese. This distance is perhaps exaggerated even more in the Russian tradition, where in addition to the commemoration of the local bishop, the Patriarch of Moscow is also commemorated, adding a papal shade to the question of parish jurisdiction.

This distance between bishop and priest has only recently started to be explored, at least in Orthodox ecclesiology.⁷ But to summarize this in a simple and direct way, if we consider, in the way that much of Orthodox ecclesiology does, that the Eucharist is the foundation of the Church, then despite the necessary overseeing of the bishop, the administrative role of the diocese without which it would be impossible to consider Christianity at a larger scale, Christianity as a process is taking place at the level of the immediate and direct gathering of the people: the parish.

Naturally, the question that follows after the establishment of the significance of the local church, at the level of parish or diocese, is the nature of the network of the local cells, the question of the harmony and coexistence among all of them. Here we see that the early Church addressed this at the level of worship experience rather than systematic thought, following the distinction between the countless teachers and the one father, that Paul refers to in 1 Cor 4:15. Simply put, although we know that by the early fourth century some significant theological schools had been developed, and also that most people showed a surprising interest in theological matters,⁸

⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 1985), 251.

⁷ Demetrios Bathrellos, "An Inadequate Approach to the Question of Conciliarity and Primacy: Reassessing the Patmos and Rhodes (1980), Munich (1982), Bari (1987), New Valamo (1988), Ravenna (2007), and Chieti (2016) Documents", in *Mapping the Una Sancta: Eastern and Western Ecclesiology in the 21st Century*, eds. Sotiris Mitralaxis and Andrew Kaethler (Winchester, Winchester University Press, 2022) forthcoming.

⁸ Cf. the frequently quoted observation of Gregory of Nyssa about people talking about theological matters everywhere, in his *On the Divinity of the Son and the Spirit*, PG xlvii 557B.

when local churches needed to coordinate in order to address a theological matter, the representatives they sent to such meetings were not teachers or professors – in other words, they were not necessarily the best theologians, as we would understand this concept today – but they were priests and bishops. Therefore, from this perspective we can consider this an indication of the representatives of the participating local churches, primarily as the ones who, as presidents of the Eucharistic act, are most suitable to speak on behalf of the worship experience of each local church.

History is, naturally, much more complex and nuanced than that, but we can visualize this principle somewhat like this: the First Ecumenical Council marked the first time when representatives of as many local Christian churches as possible came together in order to compare their experiences and address the serious problem of what kind of salvation we expect: a moral one, which is what we get if we take Jesus Christ to be the most exalted creature of God that shows us the way of personal excellence, or an ontological one, which is based on the exchange of being between human beings and God. It may be argued that these clergymen articulated theological arguments in the hope of explaining their position, and in the process threw some light on the contentious issue of the divinity of Jesus Christ, hoping to result in a philosophical compromise between the two sides, or at best a theological synthesis, a way to move beyond the disagreement. Then, after a decision had been reached, they went back to their cities, and asked hymnographers, iconographers to find new ways to express the newly proclaimed theological truth through their art. This process, which is certainly true to some extent, describes a top to bottom direction for the development of theology.

While I do not wish to deny this possibility, I would like to add another one next to it. In this case we should consider that each one of the 318 bishops who arrived at Nicea in 325, brought with them a certain experience of worship that was formed in their parishes, an experience which already included a more or less clear (even if not articulated) position about their views on what is salvation. Many of them prayed in front of images, or by singing hymns that already expressed faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ and in our transformation into the body of his divinity. In this way, their formation, their birth into the Church – by which we can understand their participation in the Eucharistic community – had already included the revelation of God in the Incarnation. Therefore, in addition to the theological discussion, these people considered their own experience in the context of the experience of every other manifestation of the One Church.

This, naturally, leads us to the discussion of the meaning of “Catholic”. Although this Greek word is usually understood as interchangeable with

“universal”, its philosophical background and the way it is still understood in a Greek context, points to something else. Καθ’ όλον, as opposed to καθ’ ἕκαστον,⁹ implies completeness over particularity, but this completeness was not understood in geographical terms, for which early Christians used the word “ecumenical” anyway: “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”¹⁰ The difficulty with this understanding of catholic is very much at the centre of this paper. We are talking here precisely about the mutual recognition of incarnational divinity in the many manifestations of the One. This would imply that it is precisely the catholicity, the completeness of each local manifestation of the One Church, that allow it to recognize itself in the other, equally complete manifestations of the One Church. To put it in terms of immediate experience, our knowledge of maternal love is fully and completely formed out of our unique relationship with our own mother. We would not expect to understand maternal love by studying the relationship of all mothers with their children everywhere, although our own experience would allow us to recognize maternal love across cultures and civilizations. The complete, unique and personal way we connect with our own mother, is at the same time a universal experience, something we can recognize in the experience of others.

Naturally, this idea is then extended to the universal manifestation of the One Church. However, in the light of catholicity as completeness, “universal” here cannot simply be reduced to global jurisdiction. Instead, in the world of ideal theology, each manifestation of the One Church can be rightfully called catholic if it addresses, includes and dialogues with all possibilities of the human condition, everywhere and at every time, in the present, the past and the future. Moreover, difference in this context may be quite enriching: what is perhaps a challenge and a difficulty in one part of the universal Church, or perhaps what is a challenge and a difficulty of each one of the multiple possibilities of being human, needs to be respected and accepted in all other parts of the Church, as if it is its own concern.

That said, we know very well that the world we live in is very different. The fragmented nature of Christianity shows us that there is a lot of distance between this idealist ecclesiology and the world in which we live. And I am afraid that when we come together, from within our separate jurisdictions,

⁹ Aristotle, *Topics* 105a14. Also Chloe Balla “Ο Πλάτων και ο Αριστοτέλης για τον Ρητορικό Εμπειρισμό” in *Φιλοσοφία και Ρητορική στην Κλασική Αθήνα*, ed. Chloe Balla, (Crete, Crete University Publications, 2008), 174–87.

¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.

we can do it at best to confess our collective and particular failure. But perhaps at the same time we can see something in events and points of contact that do not fall within the official channels of interdenominational dialogue. And I find very interesting along those lines precisely the experience of “churchiness” across borders and cultures, always at the level of the parish. It is in this way that I believe that we can indeed consider the parish as the cell of Christian life.

Here however, I can raise another concern as to the nature of the parish. There is much talk, especially in the context of the Anglican Church, about the parish as including all the people in a village or a neighbourhood, regardless of their particular beliefs and denominations. This often also entails some precise delineations among parishes, so that the boundaries between parishes and jurisdictions are clear. This is often understood in legal terms, or perhaps in administrative terms, in a way that is not too different from how there is a catchment area for schools. However, beyond this restrictive understanding of the parish jurisdiction area, there is something that we are missing here.

The experience of the all-inclusive parish of the village or the neighbourhood, at least as I can just about remember it in Greece several decades ago, reflected more accurately the catholicity of the parish as a reflection of the multiple possibilities of human nature. What I mean by that is that the traditional Greek village parish, to use this as an example, had a place for everyone; people who were rigorously pious, and people who were not very pious or even faithful at all; people who took it upon themselves to support the church financially, and people who turned to the church as one turns to their relatives for support in times of need; people of good conduct, as well as drunks, adulterers, and sinners in general.¹¹ Whether by upbringing or tradition, nobody would be cast away, certainly not for personal failings and sins, but only in the most rare of occasions, that very few people would have even heard of, when someone acted in such a way that essentially meant that they themselves chose to be cut off from the community – and never permanently.

When I visit the village where my father was born and baptized, in the church of St Gregory the Theologian, at the northern side of the village (one of two churches in the entire village), at the bottom of the great fresco of Mary at the apse, I come across a tiny inscription, which mentions that this icon was commissioned and paid for by my grandfather who was the priest

¹¹ An image of how this understood in Greece, just until a few decades ago, may be seen in the work of Alexandros Papadiamantis. Andreas Andreopoulos, “Alexandros Papadiamantis: the Saint of Greek Literature”, in *Sobornost*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2011): 19-36.

in that church at the time. And then, placed just above the fountain at the courtyard of the church, I recognize one of the icons that my father had printed and attached on old wood, and then installed there himself, with his friends and neighbours. Even more touching are these lines I find in the village archives: In 1920 the priest of the village died, not having any sons (it is usually expected that one of the sons of a priest would become his natural successor), and the villagers needed to select a new priest. From among themselves they chose my grandfather, who was in his early twenties at the time, after which they sponsored him to study in a seminary, and submitted their choice to the bishop, who agreed, having examined the candidate. My grandfather was ordained priest of his village a few years later, in 1924, at the age of 27, brought forth by the community and confirmed by the bishop.

Ties like that extend horizontally as well as vertically. That church courtyard was a meeting place for many of the young boys of the village, and more recently also a meeting place between young boys and young girls. The church was really defining that village community by giving it a centre and a soul – not unlike the sacred centre that defines the community.¹² It is true that in this world there is no breakdown of the limits between the sacred and the secular. Yet, as the soul, distinct as it is, is believed to animate the body which cannot live without a soul, the church and the village were locked in an incarnational embrace which respected their distinction – although in most of the Orthodox world the monastery was never too far from the city,¹³ providing perhaps the possibility of a soul with a thinner body.

The modern urban parish operates on a very different basis. If a community or a city is defined by its most important site, usually at its centre, the centre, and therefore the heart of the modern city is the financial district. Fewer people now remain attached to the area they were born in, and even if they try to establish themselves in a new place, the possibility of moving again and again, for professional reasons is quite real. Among my colleagues at the department of Theology, Religion and Philosophy in the University of Winchester, I think there is only one, out of ten, with meaningful ties to the area, whereas all of the rest have moved from somewhere else, many of us many times over. Therefore, overall, it is not very likely for most of us to worship in the church where we were baptized, or where our parents were

¹² This is the central idea in the most influential book by Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

¹³ Cf. Andreopoulos, "The challenges of spiritual guidance in modern Greece", in *Spiritual guidance on Mount Athos*, eds. Graham Speake and Kalistos Ware (Oxford-Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt am Main-New York-Wien, Peter Lang, 2015) 111-30.

married. Loyalty to a church, or rather more precisely, the sense of belonging to a church, has diminished greatly, and this has changed what the parish means. But then, it is important to note that loyalty, or perhaps more correctly, a sense of belonging, was a way of living that was supported by the entire church and social context, rather than a scout-like idea.

In addition, a city usually offers a choice among several parishes, and as it is not unusual for a great number of people to drive rather than walk to their church, the congregation may include many people who do not live in the immediate area. For reasons like that, the ties between a certain area, village or neighbourhood, and its church are much looser than in the past.

This inevitably means that the parish is transformed, at least to some extent, to a self-selected group of people who need to find an answer to the question “why am I here?”, before they become members of a congregation. And increasingly, answers to this question tend to be more ideological, rather than about the mysteries of existence. Public conversations, and therefore the relevance of the church in our time, are defined largely by social rather than ontological issues. I would not deny that social justice, the environment, equality of gender, religion and race, freedom or fluidity of identity, are important issues with spiritual ramifications, worthy of consideration within a church community. Nevertheless, the attempt to articulate meaning in our spiritual traditions through such social issues, cannot happen at the detriment of the central, if not the only, question that can define a spiritual community: How are we limited or not limited by death, what is eternal life, and how can we share in it? The result is that the parameters that define a congregation are more about ideology or pietism, less about participation in an inclusive community that is built on living relations, and even less about our participation in the eternal, and the ultimate fulfilment of our nature.

Of course, one can argue that this is not the first time Christianity faces this. After all, the first communities of Christians, as we see them in the *Epistle to Diognetos*, stressed their celestial citizenship over their earthly citizenship, although they found no reason to deny the latter completely.¹⁴ But I am afraid that the process is not reversible. Incarnational theology has urged Christianity to spread to the world, to become its salt, rather than take pride in its seclusion. Therefore, the return to the small church of the pre-Constantinian era can only be seen as a spiritual failure, or, to the extent that this is done intentionally, as a denial of the apostolic work of the Church.

This tendency towards an ideological transformation of the parish takes its toll in its catholicity as completeness, and even more so in the potential

¹⁴ *Epistola ad Diognetum*, 5, PG 2, 1173.

recognizability of the worshipping experience across borders and cultures. An ideological community is a community that excludes, and a pietistic community is a community that does not give a place to the sinner. The traditional parish, on the other hand, is meant to accept the entire human experience, and to reflect it back to itself, illuminated by the light of God. That can be recognizable by an outsider from another culture. When I write here – assuming my readers to be a group of varied ethnic and religious background – about the village church that still bears the memories of my grandfather, that strikes a chord with several among you, perhaps a memory from your own family past. The effect would not be quite the same if instead I had written about the struggles of jurisdiction between Greeks and Russians.

How possible is it for people to recognize their own worship life in a different parish, across differences and limitations? I believe that in order to even consider the question, it is necessary to point to some sort of common level of living meaning first, that could subsequently be articulated in several different liturgical and linguistic traditions. In other words, I believe that the experience of the average parish says more about a spiritual tradition than the experience in its most impressive cathedrals. When I visit a new country, in order to get a feel for its spiritual sensibilities, I try to visit what I hope will be an average, not exceptional, parish, in order to see how people relate to each other, what are their dynamics with their priest, and what is the sense of the sacred that one could find in that place. Genuine experience is something that can shine through differences.

I am afraid that I am very disheartened with the way most Orthodox churches in the diaspora treat this issue. While it is understandable that the generation of the immigrants hangs on to the ways it left in the old country, and therefore the spiritual and social centre of the transplanted community is intended to remind them of the home they left behind, we often see a persistence in the particular ways, or often the language of the old country, sometimes even spreading to converts who never shared that ethnic, linguistic or cultural inheritance, yet they defend it with zeal. In parishes like that I do not recognize my own worship experience, but I recognize and become more aware of my nationalism.

In the end, the quest for spiritual meaning is similar to the quest for value in poetry. Language may simply be the vehicle for something that lies beyond grammar, syntax and rational meaning, and thus give substance to a shared meaning beyond linear thought and language. In this case, this meaning may be recognized by people across cultures and civilizations, and claims the καθ' ὅλον human experience. Alternatively, if the poetic expression is exhausted in the particular beauty of this particular language, without

reference to a revelation beyond its particularity, it remains trapped in the negation of catholicity, the κατά μέρος of human experience.

In the end, I believe that the exchange of experience at the level of the parish is a necessary prerequisite before any theological exchange of ideas. In the ancient Greek understanding of φύσις and αλήθεια – nature and truth – especially as this has been developed by Yannaras,¹⁵ such fundamental concepts are not defined on their own, but as a result of the λόγος of our relationship and our shared experience. In other words, it will not be possible for us to reach a common understanding of what truth is, unless we participate in each other's experience, and we confirm what we know against our shared relational experience.

But then, is this not also the definition of the ecclesial presence of Jesus Christ as a result of the gathering of two or three in his name?

¹⁵ This is something that Yannaras has approached several times in his work. Christos Yannaras, *Ἐξί Φιλοσοφικές Ζωγραφίες* (Athens: Ikaros, 2011), and more recently in English *The Effable and the Ineffable: The Linguistic Boundaries of Metaphysical Realism* (Winchester, Winchester University Press, 2021).