

I N T E R V I E W



FATHER THOMAS HOPKO

“THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST”

AGAIN: What do the Scriptures mean when they speak of the Church as “the Body of Christ”?

FATHER HOPKO: The term “the Body of Christ,” of course, comes from the Apostle Paul. It is connected with the very realistic understanding that those who believe in Christ, those who belong to the covenant community in His blood, are literally the people of God. They become members of Christ; they are grafted to Christ.

The key to understanding the expression is found in Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where he speaks of “the Church which is His Body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23). God has made Christ head over everything—not just the head of the Church, but the head of all things—for the sake of the Church which is His Body.

The term “Church” actually means assembly. It comes from the Hebrew word *kahal*, and denotes not an abstraction, an eschatological ideal, or an invisible group of people known only to God, but rather a very concrete community. In the Old Testament sense, the *kahal* was the assembly of Israel. When the Messiah came, Christ the anointed one, the true Israel of God literally became connected to the flesh of Christ.

So the phrase “Body of Christ” means that the Church is a community, an assembly of people who are baptized into Christ, receive the Spirit of Christ, relate to God as Father, and literally constitute Christ’s Body because they are grafted

onto Him. When we add to this the fact that the bread and wine of the Eucharist constitute the actual Body and Blood, the term “Body of Christ” becomes even more realistic.

AGAIN: So when we speak of the Church as the Body of Christ, we are not speaking figuratively, but literally—that is to say a physical, actual, sacramental unity.

FATHER HOPKO: Yes. But let’s be very careful with our words here. Often times in theology we hear the distinction that something is mystical and therefore not real, or real and therefore not symbolic. Father Schmemmann deals with this issue in his book *The Eucharist*.

We are obviously not Christ’s Body in the sense of being His physical flesh and bones, hands and feet—in other words His physical Body. We are His Body in a mystical sense. But “mystical” doesn’t mean “unreal.” We are who we are, but we also constitute Christ’s mystical Body. That Body is a very real thing—a concrete community in history, made up of men and women who have been grafted to Christ.

AGAIN: With that in mind, what do you say to those who claim to be Orthodox because they maintain Orthodox doctrine and practice, yet refuse to be tangibly united with the canonical Church through the sacrament of chrismation?

FATHER HOPKO: The error here is in the very formulation of

the issue. There is no such thing as non-canonical Orthodoxy. You are either canonical or you're not Orthodox. In that sense, the Church is the Church and you're either in it or you're not in it.

Being Orthodox means more than that we believe in one God the Father Almighty, one Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life spoken of in the Nicene Creed. Being Orthodox also means we believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church as a concrete historical entity, as the Church that Christ founded when He said, "the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

As an Orthodox, to say that you believe in this Church means that you believe that it has always existed in history. If you are truly Orthodox, you want to be part of it—literally, not just figuratively. The Church can't be re-created. Similarly it can't be imitated. People can try to imitate it, but I'm afraid that if people imitate the Church, knowing what they are doing, they are not really imitating, they are mocking.

The Church can only be the Church if it is in real, literal, historical continuity with the Apostles. Saint Paul, for example, came to know Christ and received a dramatic mandate to preach Jesus as the Messiah. But he was still baptized by Ananias, and was grafted to the Church of the Twelve.

It was, of course, the disciples who were constituted by Christ as the foundation of the Church. Saint Paul didn't set up his own Church or say that the Church was unnecessary. So there has to be a concrete, sacramental, canonical unity. People can't be divided as separate entities and claim to be the same Church.

GAIN: What about the flip side of that? Does being canonical guarantee being Orthodox?

FATHER HOPKO: A person could be a canonical Orthodox and be a great sinner and go to hell. A person can be outside the Orthodox Church—perhaps because of ignorance of what Orthodoxy is—and who is going to judge him? God will judge him, not man!

Being a member of Israel did not prevent people from worshipping the golden calf, or setting up altars in high places. It was God's people who did these things. The heretics in Church history became heretics because they were Orthodox and then left the Church. So heresy, schism, and apostasy are possible, but they are possible only for people who are in the Church.

Our day and age is unique. There are countless people

who are born and raised as Christians who, due to the schisms and splits of the past, are not within the Church in its historic continuity. But it would seem to me that any Christian would—to the extent that that person desires to be Orthodox—want to be united to the Church.

AGAIN: Perhaps someone would criticize here and say, "If the Orthodox Church is the true Church, why do some Orthodox Churches today appear to be ethnically bound and spiritually sleepy?" How would you respond?

FATHER HOPKO: There are, of course, more vibrant Churches and less vibrant Churches—that was the case even in the New

Testament. If you look through history you never find—never—the great masses of people in Church glowing with sanctity and living in peace and harmony. Other Churches that are founded to be "pure," those that consider themselves to be set apart and to have only committed members, have division upon division. They can't decide on carpet color, the deacon-board, or even doctrine, and they split into parts that split again.

The saints are always a remnant, a holy remnant, even within the Church. If you take the time of the Apostles, many of the Christians were not within the apostolic tradition. In the early Church, you had Gnostics and all sorts of pseudo-Christian movements. The false or pseudo scriptures of the early Christian era were three times as

large as the canonical Scriptures!

When you turn to the holy Fathers we venerate today, most of them were exiled a good portion of their lives. Athanasius was exiled many times. Chrysostom died in exile. Maximus the Confessor had his tongue cut out and his arm cut off. They all said he was wrong. The world was often in the hands of heretics. When the iconoclasts ruled the Church for a century, the Orthodox Christians were the persecuted minority.

So, regrettably, there has always been sin and apostasy on the earth, and within the true Church. But such calamity doesn't change the fact that there is a body in history that has one faith, one worship, a traceable development, and continuity which began historically with the Apostles.

AGAIN: If we view the phrase "Body of Christ" from an historic and sacramental perspective, what does this say about sincere Christians who are following Christ according to the light they have been given, but for one reason or another have not been tangibly grafted into the Orthodox Church?



FATHER HOPKO: Christ Himself said, "Those who are not against me are with me." We believe in a merciful God, Who judges everyone on the basis of what they know, not on what they do not know. In fact, those who know will be judged with greater severity. In Luke 12, Jesus says that when the master comes, the servants who know the master's will, but do not act accordingly, will get a severe beating. Those who didn't know him will get a light beating.

Christ died to save everyone and everything. Without Christ, there is no salvation. No one would be in the Kingdom if Christ hadn't died on the cross and risen from the dead. A person whose providence it has been not to hear the gospel, or to hear the gospel in a deformed or incomplete form, will be judged on that basis. We do not equate membership in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church with "automatic" salvation.

It would be heresy to claim that everyone not in the True Church will burn in hell. That is not true, and not in accordance with Orthodox theology. God in His mercy judges everyone according to what they have received and what they have done with it.

Cyprian said, "Outside the Church there is no salvation." He did not mean that unless you are in the Church you are *de facto* going to hell. Rather, if you know the Church is there, and you intentionally set yourself against it—as the Donatists were doing in his day—you are outside salvation.

There were always people who rejected the historical Body of Christ for the sake of their own ill-conceived, charismatic, or mystical relationship to the Lord. They thought they could have their relationship outside the actual assembly of people in history who came from the Apostles and who constitute the Christian faith and the Christian Church.

As Father Florovsky has pointed out, "Outside the Church there is no salvation," is really a tautology. The Church *is* salvation, the Church *is* eternal life in its deepest and fullest sense. This salvation is in the Orthodox Church, despite the sins of its weakest earthly members.

God judges the hearts of people. *Why* are they outside of the Church? *Why* are they in? The important thing is that we are in it for the right reason or out of it for the right reason. Any people are out of her for very wrong reasons. And there are people who are in without knowing why—they are the most to be pitied.

By the way, the Orthodox procedure for receiving people

teaches us something here. If people have been, in good faith, baptized into the Holy Trinity, they are not re-baptized. Christians who are not Orthodox belong to a group that at some point in history separated itself from her. And that which is Orthodox that still remains—even if that separation took place 500 or 900 years ago—is honored.

AGAIN: How do you respond to those who accuse the Orthodox Church of having a spirit of triumphalism in believing she holds the fulness of the faith?

FATHER HOPKO: Any Christian who reads the New Testament should believe that the Church described there has the fulness of the faith. If Saint Paul is right when he says the Church is the Body of Christ, if he is right when he says God made Christ the head over all things for the sake of the Church which is His Body, the fulness of Him Who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:23), if the Church is the pillar and bulwark of the truth, and Christ is the truth, then anyone must believe that Church has the fulness of the truth.

It is very important that we Orthodox Christians confess that God the Father is the true God, Christ is His only-begotten Son, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and that the Church to which we belong is the true Church.

If there is no Church which has the fulness of grace and truth, the fulness of Christ's presence, then Jesus failed and the world hasn't been saved. We are just a bunch of deceived, fragmented, half-right, half-wrong people, at the mercy of a fairy tale.

The first Christians were very triumphalistic about Christ and about the life that had been given to them in the Church. All the schisms in the world don't change the fact that there is still the Church, that Church which has kept intact that faith.

We believe and proclaim to this day that there is a Church in which the fulness of grace and truth, which resides in Christ, is made accessible to human beings. This is why on Easter night we say, "And of His fulness we all received grace upon grace." If we can't say this, as Saint John did in the words of his prologue, what can we say?

We can be in the Church in which His fulness resides and be indifferent to it. But we still affirm that it is the Church. And it is only in the Church that Christ founded that His fulness resides.

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