

Characteristics of the Church



by Saint Justin Popovich

The attributes of the Church are innumerable because her attributes are actually the attributes of the Lord Christ, the God-man, and, through Him, those of the Triune Godhead. However, the holy and divinely wise fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council, guided and instructed by the Holy Spirit, reduced them in the ninth article of the Symbol of Faith to four — I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. These attributes of the Church — unity, holiness, catholicity (sobornost), and apostolicity — are derived from the very nature of the Church and of her purpose. They clearly and accurately define the character of the Orthodox Church of Christ whereby, as a theanthropic institution and community, she is distinguishable from any institution or community of the human sort.

I. The Unity and Uniqueness of the Church

Just as the Person of Christ the God-man is one and unique, so is the Church founded by Him, in Him, and upon Him. The unity of the

Church follows necessarily from the unity of the Person of the Lord Christ, the God-man. Being an organically integral and theanthropic organism unique in all the worlds, the Church, according to all the laws of Heaven and earth, is indivisible. Any division would signify her death. Immersed in the God-man, she is first and foremost a theanthropic organism, and only then a theanthropic organization. In her, everything is theanthropic: nature, faith, love, baptism, the Eucharist, all the holy mysteries and all the holy virtues, her teaching, her entire life, her immortality, her eternity, and her structure. Yes, yes, yes; in her, everything is theanthropically integral and indivisible Christification, sanctification, deification, Trinitarianism, salvation. In her everything is fused organically and by grace into a single theanthropic body, under a single Head — the God-man, the Lord Christ. All her members, though as persons always whole and inviolate, yet united by the same grace of the Holy Spirit through the holy mysteries and the holy virtues into an organic unity, comprise one body and confess the one faith, which unites them to each other and to the Lord Christ.

The Christ-bearing apostles are divinely inspired as they announce the unity and the uniqueness of the Church, based upon the unity and uniqueness of her Founder — the God-man, the Lord Christ, and His theanthropic personality: "For another foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11).

Like the holy apostles, the holy fathers and the teachers of the Church confess the unity and uniqueness of the Orthodox Church with the divine wisdom of the cherubim and the zeal of the seraphim. Understandable,

therefore, is the fiery zeal which animated the holy fathers of the Church in all cases of division and falling away and the stern attitude toward heresies and schisms. In that regard, the holy ecumenical and holy local councils are preeminently important. According to their spirit and attitude, wise in those things pertaining to Christ, the Church is not only one but also unique. Just as the Lord Christ cannot have several bodies, so He cannot have several Churches. According to her theanthropic nature, the Church is one and unique, just as Christ the God-man is one and unique.

Hence, a division, a splitting up of the Church is ontologically and essentially impossible. A division within the Church has never occurred, nor indeed can one take place, while apostasy from the Church has and will continue to occur after the manner of those voluntarily fruitless branches which, having withered, fall away from the eternally living theanthropic Vine — the Lord Christ (Jn. 15:1-6). From time to time, heretics and schismatics have cut themselves off and have fallen away from the one and indivisible Church of Christ, whereby they ceased to be members of the Church and parts of her theanthropic body. The first to fall away thus were the gnostics, then the Arians, then the Macedonians, then the Monophysites, then the Iconoclasts, then the Roman Catholics, then the Protestants, then the Uniates, and so on—all the other members of the legion of heretics and schismatics.

II. The Holiness of the Church

By her theanthropic nature, the Church is undoubtedly a unique organization in the world. All her holiness resides in her nature. Actually, she is the theanthropic workshop of human sanctification and, through men, of the sanctification of the rest of creation. She is holy as the theanthropic Body of Christ, whose eternal head is the Lord Christ Himself; and whose immortal soul is the Holy Spirit. Wherefore everything in her is holy: her teaching, her grace, her mysteries, her virtues, all her powers, and all her instruments have been deposited in her for the sanctification of men and of all created things. Having become the Church by His incarnation out of an unparalleled love for man, our God and Lord Jesus Christ sanctified the Church by His sufferings, Resurrection, Ascension, teaching, wonder-working, prayer, fasting, mysteries, and virtues; in a word, by His entire theanthropic life. Wherefore the divinely inspired pronouncement has been rendered: ". . . Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).

The flow of history confirms the reality of the Gospel: the Church is filled to overflowing with sinners. Does their presence in the Church reduce, violate, or destroy her sanctity? Not in the least! For her Head — the Lord Christ, and her Soul — the Holy Spirit, and her divine teaching, her mysteries, and her virtues, are indissolubly and immutably holy. The Church tolerates sinners, shelters them, and instructs them, that they may

be awakened and roused to repentance and spiritual recovery and transfiguration; but they do not hinder the Church from being holy. Only unrepentant sinners, persistent in evil and godless malice, are cut off from the Church either by the visible action of the theanthropic authority of the Church or by the invisible action of divine judgment, so that thus also the holiness of the Church may be preserved. "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (I Cor. 5:13).

In their writings and at the Councils, the holy fathers confessed the holiness of the church as her essential and immutable quality. The fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council defined it dogmatically in the ninth article of the Symbol of Faith. And the succeeding ecumenical councils confirmed it by the seal of their assent.

III. The Catholicity (Sobornost) of the Church

The theanthropic nature of the Church is inherently and all-encompassingly universal and catholic: it is theanthropically universal and theanthropically catholic. The Lord Christ, the God-man, has by Himself and in Himself most perfectly and integrally united God and Man and, through man, all the worlds and all created things to God. The fate of creation is essentially linked to that of man (cf. Romans 8:19-24). In her theanthropic organism, the Church encompasses: "all things created, that are in Heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers" (Col. 1:16). Everything is in the God-man; He is the Head of the Body of the Church (Col. 1:17-18).

In the theanthropic organism of the Church everyone lives in the fullness of his personality as a living, godlike cell. The law of theanthropic catholicity encompasses all and acts through all. All the while, the theanthropic equilibrium between the divine and the human is always duly preserved. Being members of her body, we in the Church experience the fullness of our being in all its godlike dimensions. Furthermore: in the Church of the God-man, man experiences his own being as all-encompassing, as theanthropically all-encompassing; he experiences himself not only as complete, but also as the totality of creation. In a word: he experiences himself as a god-man by grace.

The theanthropic catholicity of the Church is actually an unceasing christification of many by grace and virtue: all is gathered in Christ the God-man, and everything is experienced through Him as one's own, as a single indivisible theanthropic organism. For life in the Church is a theanthropic catholicization, the struggle of acquiring by grace and virtue the likeness of the God-man, christification, theosis, life in the Trinity, sanctification, transfiguration, salvation, immortality, and churchliness. Theanthropic catholicity in the Church is reflected in and achieved by the eternally living Person of Christ, the God-man Who in the most perfect way has united God to man and to all creation, which has been cleansed of sin, evil, and death by the Savior's precious Blood (cf. Col. 1:19-22). The theanthropic Person of the Lord Christ is the very soul of the Church's catholicity. It is the God-man Who always preserves the theanthropic balance between the divine and the human in the catholic life of the Church. The Church is filled to overflowing with the

Lord Christ, for she is "the fullness of Him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23). Wherefore, she is universal in every person that is found within her, in each of her tiny cells. That universality, that catholicity resounds like thunder particularly through the holy apostles, through the holy fathers, through the holy ecumenical and local councils.

IV. The Apostolicity of the Church

The holy apostles were the first god-men by grace. Like the Apostle Paul each of them, by his integral life, could have said of himself: "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20). Each of them is a Christ repeated; or, to be more exact, a continuation of Christ. Everything in them is theanthropic because everything was received from the God-man. Apostolicity is nothing other than the God-manhood of the Lord Christ, freely assimilated through the holy struggles of the holy virtues: faith, love, hope, prayer, fasting, etc. This means that everything that is of man lives in them freely through the God-man, thinks through the God-man, feels through the God-man, acts through the God-man and wills through the God-man. For them, the historical God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the supreme value and the supreme criterion. Everything in them is of the God-man, for the sake of the God-man, and in the God-man. And it is always and everywhere thus. That for them is immortality in the time and space of this world. Thereby are they even on this earth partakers of the theanthropic eternity of Christ.

This theanthropic apostolicity is integrally continued in the earthly successors of the Christ-bearing apostles: in the holy fathers. Among

them, in essence, there is no difference: the same God-man Christ lives, acts, enlivens and makes them all eternal in equal measure, He Who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). Through the holy fathers, the holy apostles live on with all their theanthropic riches, theanthropic worlds, theanthropic holy things, theanthropic mysteries, and theanthropic virtues. The holy fathers in fact are continuously apostolizing, whether as distinct godlike personalities, or as bishops of the local churches, or as members of the holy ecumenical and holy local councils. For all of them there is but one Truth, one Transcendent Truth: the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Behold, the holy ecumenical councils, from the first to the last, confess, defend, believe, announce, and vigilantly preserve but a single supreme value: the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The principal Tradition, the transcendent Tradition, of the Orthodox Church is the living God-man Christ, entire in the theanthropic Body of the Church of which He is the immortal, eternal Head. This is not merely the message, but the transcendent message of the holy apostles and the holy fathers. They know Christ crucified, Christ resurrected, Christ ascended. They all, by their integral lives and teachings, with a single soul and a single voice, confess that Christ the God-man is wholly in His Church, as in His Body. Each of the holy fathers could rightly repeat with St. Maximus the Confessor: "In no wise am I expounding my own opinion, but that which I have been taught by the fathers, without changing aught in their teaching."

And from the immortal proclamation of St. John of Damascus there resounds the universal confession of all the holy fathers who were glorified by God: "Whatever has been transmitted to us through the Law, and the prophets, and the apostles, and the evangelists, we receive and know and esteem highly, and beyond that we ask nothing more. . . Let us be fully satisfied with it, and rest therein, removing not the ancient landmarks (Prov. 22:28), nor violating the divine Tradition." And then, the touching, fatherly admonition of the holy Damascene, directed to all Orthodox Christians: "Wherefore, brethren, let us plant ourselves upon the rock of faith and the Tradition of the Church, removing not the landmarks set by our holy fathers, nor giving room to those who are anxious to introduce novelties and to undermine the structure of God's holy ecumenical and apostolic Church. For if everyone were allowed a free hand, little by little the entire Body of the Church would be destroyed."

The holy Tradition is wholly of the God-man, wholly of the holy apostles, wholly of the holy fathers, wholly of the Church, in the Church, and by the Church. The holy fathers are nothing other than the "guardians of the apostolic tradition. " All of them, like the holy apostles themselves, are but "witnesses" of a single and unique Truth: the transcendent Truth of Christ, the God-man. They preach and confess it without rest, they, the "golden mouths of the Word." The God-man, the Lord Christ is one, unique, and indivisible. So also is the Church unique and indivisible, for she is the incarnation of the Theanthropos Christ, continuing through the ages and through all eternity. Being such by her

nature and in her earthly history, the Church may not be divided. It is only possible to fall away from her. That unity and uniqueness of the Church is theanthropic from the very beginning and through all the ages and all eternity.

Apostolic succession, the apostolic heritage, is theanthropic from first to last. What is it that the holy apostles are transmitting to their successors as their heritage? The Lord Christ, the God-man Himself, with all the imperishable riches of His wondrous theanthropic Personality, Christ—the Head of the Church, her sole Head. If it does not transmit that, apostolic succession ceases to be apostolic, and the apostolic Tradition is lost, for there is no longer an apostolic hierarchy and an apostolic Church.

The holy Tradition is the Gospel of the Lord Christ, and the Lord Christ Himself, Whom the Holy Spirit instills in each and every believing soul, in the entire Church. Whatever is Christ's, by the power of the Holy Spirit becomes ours, human; but only within the body of the Church. The Holy Spirit—the soul of the Church, incorporates each believer, as a tiny cell, into the body of the Church and makes him a "co-heir" of the God-man (Eph. 3:6). In reality the Holy Spirit makes every believer into a God-man by grace. For what is life in the Church? Nothing other than the transfiguration of each believer into a God-man by grace through his personal, evangelical virtues; it is his growth in Christ, the putting on of Christ by growing in the Church and being a member of the Church. A Christian's life is a ceaseless, Christ-centered theophany: the Holy Spirit, through the holy mysteries and the holy virtues, transmits Christ the

Savior to each believer, renders him a living tradition, a living life: "Christ who is our life" (Col. 3:4). Everything Christ's thereby becomes ours, ours for all eternity: His truth, His righteousness, His love, His life, and His entire divine Hypostasis.

Holy Tradition? It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man Himself, with all the riches of his divine Hypostasis and, through Him and for His sake, those of the Holy Trinity. That is most fully given and articulated in the Holy Eucharist, wherein, for our sake and for our salvation, the Savior's entire theanthropic economy of salvation is performed and repeated. Therein wholly resides the God-man with all His wondrous and miraculous gifts; He is there, and in the Church's life of prayer and liturgy. Through all this, the Savior's philanthropic proclamation ceaselessly resounds: "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Mt. 28 20). He is with the apostles and, through the apostles, with all the faithful, world without end. This is the whole of the holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church of the apostles: life in Christ = life in the Holy Trinity; growth in Christ = growth in the Trinity (cf. Mt. 28: 19-20).

Of extraordinary importance is the following: in Christ's Orthodox Church, the Holy Tradition, ever living and life-giving, comprises: the holy liturgy, all the divine services, all the holy mysteries, all the holy virtues, the totality of eternal truth and eternal righteousness, all love, all eternal life, the whole of the God-man, the Lord Christ, the entire Holy Trinity, and the entire theanthropic life of the Church in its theanthropic fullness, with the All-holy Theotokos and all the saints.

The personality of the Lord Christ the God-man, transfigured within the Church, immersed in the prayerful, liturgical, and boundless sea of grace, wholly contained in the Eucharist, and wholly in the Church—this is holy Tradition. This authentic good news is confessed by the holy fathers and the holy ecumenical councils. By prayer and piety holy Tradition is preserved from all human demonism and devilish humanism, and in it is preserved the entire Lord Christ, He Who is the eternal Tradition of the Church. "Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (I Tim. 3 16): He was manifest as a man, as a God-man, as the Church, and by His philanthropic act of salvation and deification of humanity He magnified and exalted man above the holy cherubim and the most holy seraphim.

Originally published in *Orthodox Life*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1981), pp. 28-33. Translated by Stephen Karganovic from *The Orthodox Church & Ecumenism* (in Serbian) by Archimandrite Justin (Popovich) (Thessalonica: Chilandar Monastery, 1974), pp. 64-74.