

On Trinity, Church, and the Eucharist in Christian Mission

An Orthodox Perspective

Spencer Estabrooks

This article is a revision of the core of a presentation made in response to a major project “The Place of Independent Organized Ministry in Relation to the Local Church” by John Pellowe, presented at a Forum held in Mississauga, Ontario, on February the 3rd 2007, and sponsored by the Canadian Council of Christian Charities. Pellowe identified the doctrine of the Trinity, the work of the Holy Spirit, and ecclesiology as key topics, through better understanding of which, greater cooperation in mission might be fostered between independent organized ministries and local churches, especially within the Protestant world. The Forum included responses to Pellowe’s paper by a panel of representatives from Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox participants. I offer this Orthodox vision regarding the relationship of Trinity, Church and mission as another perspective in which evangelical Protestants might possibly find a fresh approach in their reflection on the issue of the relationship between independent ministries and the local church.

The Holy Trinity as the Source of Christian Unity, the Core of the Church’s Life, and the Origin and Goal of Mission

I have chosen Matthew 28: 18-20, the Nicene Creed, and the icon of the Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev, all of which are Trinitarian in essence, to address, from an Orthodox perspective, the relationship of ecclesiology, missiology and theology (including the doctrines of the Trinity and the work of the Holy Spirit), as key themes within which to explore the nature and unity of the Church’s life and mission.

Jesus said to the apostles: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me: go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age [world]" (Matthew, 28:18-20).

In keeping with this last phrase "And lo, I am with you always. . . ." we greet one another as Orthodox Christians, and also the celebrants at the time of the Eucharistic offering greet one another, with the words "Christ is in our midst," with the response being: "He is, and ever shall be." Jesus continues to do in the Church all that He did on earth. He does it in us and through us as the Church. We make disciples (catechumens) of all of those who are drawn by the Holy Spirit, through the message concerning Jesus Christ, we exorcise them, and then we baptize them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – one Name, three Persons. The name, as is clear in the Hebrew Scriptures and tradition, is an indication and expression of the reality which it bears. To be baptized into the name, is to be united with the living God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The preposition in this passage on baptism, usually translated as "in," is *eis* in the original Greek, meaning "into." It is not *en* which would be equivalent to our "in."¹ The Orthodox Church views baptism as a holy mystery or in Western Christian terminology as a sacrament. In one of his statements on this passage, St. Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) does not refer to "name" at all, but says "And so we are baptized as we were taught, into the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit"² Thus, we are baptized into the reality of the life of the Trinity. St. Gregory³ and St. Basil the Great⁴ both state that, as we are baptized into the name of the Father,

¹ In a long list of uses of *eis* in Arndt and Gingrich's Greek-English Lexicon there is no example of *eis* giving the sense of "in" rather than "into."

² "To Heraklianos, a Heretic" (Letter 24) by Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in *The Father's Speak: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa*, translated by Georges Barrois (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), p. 126.

³ Ibid., p. 126.

⁴ Ibid., p.137, "Copy of the Profession of Faith Submitted by Basil and Signed by Eustathios" (Letter 125).

Son, and Holy Spirit, so also we make our confession of faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and so also in our worship we glorify the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus our doctrine and our worship arises from, conforms to, and expresses, the foundational reality of the Holy Trinity which is the living, Divine Reality in which we participate, into communion with which we enter through baptism.

Thus, everything in the Church must reflect this living reality within which the Church exists, and into which its members are incorporated. Everything in the Church flows from this source, and all that is spiritually accomplished and done in the Church and through her; for example, her worship and life and mission, is in fact, the continued work of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Father.

Christ's great commission continues: "teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you" – baptism is only the beginning. Having our whole life conformed to Christ and transformed by Him in the Spirit, for communion with the Father, is the ultimate goal of all missions. Complete sanctification and transformation in the Holy Spirit,⁵ through participation in the ascetical and mystical life of the Church is the purpose of salvation.

This existential experience of the Trinity first takes place in baptism, and is constantly renewed in the Eucharist, with a view to final full sanctification, in which we become ourselves manifestations of the love of the Father, through being made into the likeness of Jesus Christ, and through the full and continuous purifying work of the Holy Spirit within us.

As Leonid Ouspensky says:

Knowledge of the Trinity is not gained by external teaching, but by an inward, living experience of the Christian life. It is an existential

⁵ In Orthodox Tradition this goal of salvation is spoken of as deification or divinization. Salvation is not primarily deliverance from guilt and from judgment in some formal legal justification, but a communion in God which transfigures our whole being in divine light and in the resurrection, through which the energies of God penetrate us, making us by grace to share in the divine powers and life which are God's by nature.

experience of divine knowledge, of which testimonies are found in the lives of the saints and in patristic writings.⁶

The Nicene Creed is simply the baptismal formula, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," expanded in order to address heretical views, which had arisen in the first three centuries in regard to the Deity and humanity of Jesus Christ and His relationship to God, the Father. The Creed has a triune focus – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – with an expansion of the part on the Son of God. There is; however, a fourth part: "and I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church," because the Church is a Divine/human reality – it is the Body of Christ, and the Church lives in the Trinity and the Trinity lives within the Church. The Church *is* the mission of the Holy Trinity for the salvation of the world. The Church *is* the new humanity, the new creation, through participation in which all things are made new and transformed in the Triune God.

The icon, re-produced in Appendix I below, often called an icon of the Holy Trinity, written by St. Andrei Rublev in the 15th century, seems to me the best way to illustrate how diversity in unity is manifest in the Holy Trinity and in the ministry of the Spirit, as well as in the Church and the mission of the Church. The Church and her mission find their origin and goal in participation in the Life of the Holy Trinity. This icon may then be seen as a picture of the Nicene Creed, in which the Church, with her mission, is a necessary outcome and means of the mission of the Holy Trinity.

The visit of the three angels to Abraham⁷ came to be understood in the tradition of the Church, as a manifestation of the Trinity, and this understanding became that of the Church. St. Andrei Rublev took a major step in reducing or omitting the historical features of this icon called *The*

⁶ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. II (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), p. 399.

⁷ This passage, understood in Judaism as revelation of God, was treated by the early church as a visitation of the pre-incarnate Son of God, the central spokesperson of the three, with two angels, though the pronouns alternate between singular and plural. Earlier icons were called "The hospitality of Abraham." St. Augustine and St. Ambrose of Milan spoke of this event as a symbolic manifestation of the Trinity [See *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition* by Boris Bobrinskoy (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), pp. 140ff].

Hospitality of Abraham, present in previous icons, and instead centered on the event as a revelation of the Holy Trinity through the angels. Thus the figures of Abraham and Sarah which appear in earlier examples of this type of icon, are eliminated. Also, the feast provided by Sarah and Abraham becomes an image of the Eucharist, which in turn, is an image of the life and mission of the Holy Trinity. We cannot make icons of the Father or the Spirit, since they did not become incarnate, though we can of the Son in His Incarnation. However, this is a pre-incarnate appearance, and though it seems indisputable to me that the angel on the left (from a viewer's perspective) represents the Father, the one in the middle represents the Son, and the one on the right – the Holy Spirit; nevertheless these are stylized angels, not images of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Regarding this icon Leonid Ouspensky notes the following:

As to iconographic symbolism, this icon illustrates the fundamental ecclesiological thesis, that the Church is a revelation of the Father in the Son and the Holy Spirit. The edifice, the house of Abraham, above the angel of the first Person, is an image of the church. The oak of Mamre – tree of life and wood of the cross, above the angel of the second person – indicates the economy of the son of God. Lastly, above the angel of the third Person, there is a mountain, a symbol of the spiritual ascent. It may be added that the meaning of this icon centers on the eucharistic cup, the divine Meal.⁸

Thus, this icon is not only an icon of the Holy Trinity, but also an icon of the Eucharist. If this is an icon of the Eucharist, it is also an icon of the Church which is constantly renewed and re-affirmed in its reality and existence as the Body of Christ, by its offering of the Eucharist and participation in the Eucharist, according to the Orthodox Church.

Beginning at the bottom of the icon we see an entrance for the viewer between the feet of the first and third angels, which opens out into a chalice-shaped space between the three figures seated at the table/altar. Only by dying and rising with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in baptism, can we enter

⁸ Ibid., n.70, pp.399-400.

into His way of life and reality, and through union with the Son, enter into relation with the Father as sons of God by grace. Only in the Spirit, who searches the deep things of God, can we know experientially, and participate in, the life of the Trinity, as is indicated by the hand of the third angel blessing those who enter into life in Christ.

The space between the three figures is in the shape of a chalice. I think that it is the space in which the Church exists. Dying to self and rising to new life in Christ, laying down our lives in baptism, is the only way we can enter the life of the Church and the life of the Holy Trinity. That is, we must be united with Christ in the offering of Himself which the Son of God makes. Each Eucharistic Liturgy we unite our offering of bread and wine and with it ourselves and one another and the whole world, in Christ, presenting it to the Father, asking Him to send the Holy Spirit upon it, making it the Body and Blood of Christ, by participation in which we become His Body on earth. Only by participation in Christ's death and resurrection and self-giving on behalf of the world, do we enter into His Sonship by adoption, and come to know the God and Father of all.

In the Orthodox Church, there are three sacraments or mysteries of entrance to the Church which have been retained and are administered at the time of one being united with the Church. The first is Baptism, a dying and rising with Christ, an Easter event; the second is Chrismation, the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is a personal Pentecost for the new believer; and the third is Holy Communion, by which one enters into full communion with the God and Father of all, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist are entered into together by the newly baptized. One cannot have communion with the Son without the Spirit, nor with the Son without the Father, nor with the Father without the Spirit and the Son. Chrismation, which is an anointing with special ointment⁹ on forehead, eyes, ears, nose, lips, chest, hands and feet, is a continuation of the apostolic laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit. I believe that these three Holy Mysteries of incorporation into the Church are embodied in this icon.

⁹ This ointment is prepared by the leading bishop of a self-governing Orthodox Church.

Orthodox Church life begins within, exists within, and finds its goal within the Holy Trinity. Everything is rooted in the life of the Holy Trinity, and unfolds from the Trinity. The Church participates in the life and mission of the Trinity. In the Church the world meets the Living God, and is drawn into His life, and is saved and transformed by the work of the Holy Trinity. The Divine Liturgy, the central Eucharistic worship of the Orthodox Church is actually the Liturgy, the work, of the Holy Trinity, the outpouring of the life of the Trinity for the world. We enter into this Divine Liturgy, which is depicted in the icon. The Greek word *leiturgia* means a service done on behalf of others or for the public good. We participate in the Divine Liturgy of the Holy Trinity by offering ourselves and one another and our whole life and the world through Christ, in the Spirit, to the Father. The priest, with whom we are united in the offering, as the chalice is raised to heaven, proclaims: "Your own of your own we offer you, on behalf of all, and for all." Thus, ecclesiology and mission are inseparably linked with worship, and vice-versa. Ecclesiology, mission and worship are all expressed and understood within Orthodox Christianity, as participation in the life of the Trinity and as the work of the Trinity within the new humanity, the Body of Christ, and through it, within the world.

This icon shows that there is no independence of action by the Persons within the life of the Trinity nor should there be in the one Church. As St Paul says, the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ, and God the Father all work together with one will and purpose: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:4-6). By observing the hands of the three angels, one can see that there is one will and action within the Holy Trinity, diversely manifested by each of the Persons, but carried out as one continuous work. All three have the sceptre of authority and are turned to one another in perfect harmony and form a circle of unity by the incline of their bodies. On the viewer's left the Father ordains or originates our salvation, the Son accomplishes our salvation (notice his hand pointing to the chalice, recalling His words: "this is my Body" and "this is My Blood"), and the Spirit completes or perfects our salvation, the hand pointing down upon the

chalice, and upon the space where each person enters the Church and the life of the Holy Trinity. As the Church Fathers repeatedly say, and as the Scriptures attest, all things come from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, and all things return the opposite way in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father, as one can see by the inclination of the heads of the figures.

So, if this is an icon of the Trinity, and of the Church which lives within the Trinity and within which the Trinity lives, it is; therefore, also an icon of Holy Baptism (dying and rising with Christ, a personal Passover or Easter), and Holy Chrismation (that is, the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, a personal Pentecost) by which we enter the Church, the Body of Christ. It is an icon of the Eucharist, of communion in the life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Church thus is an icon, a manifestation of the Trinity, and the major means of the working of salvation by the Trinity in the world. So the Church must manifest the Trinity in her oneness and in her diversity in everything she is and does, in the perfect and harmonious order and cooperation of the Persons of the Holy Trinity who work in her to produce one heart and one mind, as St. Luke and St. Paul emphasize in their writings.

The icon is also an icon of the Ascension, just as the Eucharistic liturgy each Sunday and Feast Day is an ascension into heaven. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann emphasizes this in his writings, especially in His work *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*.¹⁰ Our humanity has been seated in Christ in the heavenly places, and participates in the life of God. We are to seek those things which are above, where Christ is, for our life is hidden with Christ in God.¹¹ To be united with Christ in communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit we must enter into His sacrificial and self-emptying love on behalf of the world.

¹⁰ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), pp. 28-29, 31, 36-37, 41-42, and 45-46.

¹¹ See Eph. 5:4-7; Philippians 3:8-11, 20-21; Col. 3:1-4, and cf. the hymns of the Feast of the Ascension, which stress the glorification of our humanity and its being seated in Christ at the right hand of the Father.

The Final Goal of Mission

Our goal in mission must be the same as that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who carry out this mission in and through us, the Church. An immediate goal of mission is bringing the world by repentance back into communion with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, with the final goal being that of full transfiguration of earthly life through penetration by the Life and Light and Love and Truth of God, beginning now, and being consummated finally in the resurrection of the body and eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

The work of Andrei Rublev is linked by various writers to a deep spiritual renewal which spread through the Slavic countries in the period previous to, and including, the lifetime of the icon master. This movement has been called the Hesychastic Movement, which in its essence reaches back to the origins of Christianity. In relating this icon to St. Sergius in Russia, Ouspensky points out that

It is not by chance that it is precisely in the wake of St. Sergius of Radonezh, himself a "dwelling place of the Trinity" (troparion of the saint), that this image of the Old Testament Trinity is shown with a new fullness, a new vision and a new theological content in the icon of St. Andrei Rublev. The icon of the Old Testament Trinity links the beginning of Church in the Old Testament, the promise made to Abraham, to the moment at which the New Testament Church was founded. The beginning of divine revelation is joined to its consummation on the day of Pentecost, to the supreme revelation of the tri-hypostatic Divinity. It is precisely in this image that the "action of the Spirit" unfolded to Andrei the monk the meaning of the Old Testament revelation, a new vision of the Trinitarian life.¹²

Each Eucharistic celebration we enter into the 8th day, the new age of transfigured and eternal life. There is one Eucharist in heaven and there is one liturgy in the presence of the Holy Trinity. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated on earth it is our ascension with our offering, in Christ, to the

¹² Ouspensky, p. 399.

altar and throne of God in heaven, united with those who have departed. In this worship we exclaim in one voice with the heavenly hosts, "Holy, Holy, Holy." The Trinity lives within the Church, and works salvation in the world and in each of the Church's members by this constant flow in the life of the Trinity, and the outflow of this love into the world in its members and actions in the world. Every Liturgy is an ascent to the Kingdom of God, a participation in the reality of the eighth day, beyond the old creation, the consummation of all things, the new creation.

Conclusion

Thus, in trying to express the Orthodox experience of Church and mission, I propose that the origin, unity, goal and fulfillment of the Church and of her mission is the Trinitarian life and mission, which is worked out in the Church and through her. Into this restored communion and love and transfiguration, the world is continually called to become the new creation within the old. Thus the Church is always bringing the world into the Church and into the life of the Holy Trinity in order to be transfigured, and through this transfiguration to bear witness in the world of the new creation and eternal life in God.

This image by Rublev, expressing the Tradition of the Orthodox Church, unites all with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, in the Eucharist, in the one Church. This Church is both the goal of God's mission and its means, in drawing all creation into the Trinitarian life of transfiguring love, where all is penetrated through and through and continually sanctified in unending beatitude.

Rublev's icon presents to us the way in which all aspects of the Church's life and mission ought to be penetrated by one another in full and perfect oneness of mind and heart, even as the Persons of the Holy Trinity share one nature, and even as the Persons of the Holy Trinity live and express Triune God in the life and mission of the Church.¹³

¹³ This perfect harmony among the Persons of the Trinity expressed in Rublev's icon, is called *perichoresis*, to use the Greek term, or, in the English expression coined by Charles Williams, *co-inherence*.

Appendix I

A digital image of the icon by Andrei Rublev (born between 1360-70, died in 1430), *The Hospitality of Abraham* (beginning of the 15th Century)



Appendix II

Some Resources for Further Exploration

Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today, by James J. Stamoolis (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Light and Life Publishing, 1986). See especially chapters 11, 12 and 13: "The Liturgy in Orthodox Missiology", "Missiological Dimensions in Orthodox Ecclesiology", "The Missionary Nature of the Church".

"The Theology of the Holy Spirit" and "The Church and Ministry", chapters I and III respectively in *Catholicity and the Church* by John Meyendorff (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983).

"Trinitarian Relations and The Life of The Church" , "The Holy Spirit and the Sobornicity of The Church" and "The Holy Trinity: Structure of Supreme Love", chapters 1 to 3 in *Theology and the Church* by Dumitru Staniloae, transl. by Robert Barringer (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

"God and Man in the Orthodox Church" and "Catholicity and Ecumenism", chapters 1 and 3 respectively in *All the Fulness of God: Essays on Orthodoxy, Ecumenism and Modern Society* by Fr. Thomas Hopko (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982).

The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition by Boris Bobrinskoy, translated by Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999).

The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom, by Alexander Schmemmann (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988)

Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism by Alexander Schmemmann (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974).

Doors of Perception – Icons and Their Spiritual Significance by John Baggley (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988).

Theology of the Icon, vol. 1 and 2 by Leonid Ouspensky (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992).

Bunge, Gabriel. *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*, transl. by Andrew Louth. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007.

About the author: Spencer Estabrooks, MA, MDiv, is Director of St. Arseny Orthodox Christian Theological Institute, Faculty of Theology, the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba.