

The Holy Trinity: Source of Unity in the Church, the Core of the Church's Life, and the Fountain of the Church's Mission

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I have chosen Matthew 28:18-20, the Nicene Creed, and the icon of the Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev to address from an Orthodox perspective John Pellowe's identification of ecclesiology, missiology and theology, in particular the Trinity and the work of the Holy Spirit, as key themes to explore in this conference about the relationship between independent Christian ministries and the local church. 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)."

In keeping with this last phrase "And lo, I am with you always. . . ." we greet one another as Orthodox Christians, as also the celebrants at the time of the Eucharistic offering greet one another, with the words "Christ is in our midst," 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 or learners of all of those who are drawn by 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 used in this passage at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, usually translated in this passage as “in”, is in Greek “eis,” 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. Thus, 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 communion in 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, 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, 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,” because baptism is only the beginning. Having our whole life conformed to Christ and transformed by Him in the Spirit,

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).

for communion with the Father, is the ultimate goal of all mission. Complete sanctification and transformation in the Holy Spirit⁵ is the final outcome of mission, of bringing people into communion with Christ. 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 Holy Trinity through purification and the full and continuous work of the Holy Spirit within us.

As Leonid Ouspensky notes:

Knowledge of the Trinity is not gained by external teaching, but by an inward, living experience of the Christian life. It is an existential experience of divine knowledge, of which testimonies are found in the lives of the saints and in patristic writings.⁶

The Nicene Creed (or preferably the Nicene Symbol of Faith because it is not just a rational construct but is connected with that which it symbolizes) is simply the baptismal formula, “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” expanded in order to address heretical views which had arisen as challenges in the first three centuries of the Church’ teaching and integrity. It has a Trinitarian structure, 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, as Fr. Thomas Hopko stresses, the Church is a Divine/human reality and is an object of faith⁷ – it is the Body of Christ, and the Church lives in the Trinity and the Trinity lives within the Church. The Church

5. In Orthodox Tradition this goal of salvation is spoken of as deification or divinization. Salvation is not primarily deliverance from guilt and judgment in some formal justification, but a communion in God which transfigures our whole being in divine light and in the resurrection in 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.

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

7. Fr. Thomas Hopko on “Are Protestants in the Church?” Orthodox Christian Information Center <<http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/hopko.aspx>>

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.

Andrei Rublev's Hospitality of Abraham

The icon that is provided below, often popularly 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, which find their origin and goal in participation in the Life of the Holy Trinity. This icon may be seen as a picture of the Nicene Symbol of Faith, in which the Church with her mission is an outcome and continuation of the mission of the Holy Trinity.

The visit of the three angels to Abraham⁸ 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 the historical features of this icon called "the hospitality of Abraham," such as eliminating the figures of Abraham and Sarah, present in previous icons, and centering on the event as a revelation of the Holy Trinity through the angels. He also made the feast provided by Sarah and Abraham into a symbol of the Eucharist (one can still see the calf's head in the chalice). We cannot make icons of the Father or the Spirit, since they did not become incarnate, though we can of the Son because of His Incarnation. However, this is a pre-incarnate appearance of God through angels, and though it seems indisputable to me that the angel on the left represents the Father, that in the middle – the Son, and the one on the right – the Holy Spirit (as we face the icon), nevertheless these are stylized angels, not images of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. By those most knowledgeable in these matters,

8. 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.

it has been noted that the central angel's robes are in more solid colour because of His incarnation. The saints and Fathers tell us that appearances of God in the Old Testament were manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God.



Regarding this icon Leonid Ouspensky says:

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.⁹

Thus, this icon is not only an icon of the Holy Trinity, but also an icon of the Eucharist. And 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 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 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. And 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 Son-ship by adoption, and come to know the God and Father of all.

9. *Ibid.*, n.70, pp.399-400.

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 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, nor with the Spirit without the Son and the Father. Chrismation, which is an anointing with special ointment¹⁰ 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.

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 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 *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. As the priest, with whom we are united in the offering, raises the chalice to heaven, he proclaims “Your own of your own we offer you, on behalf of all, and for all.” Thus, with the other topics identified by our host, John; that is, ecclesiology and mission, I would also include worship and say that all are expressed and understood within Orthodox Christianity, as participation in the life of the Trinity and as the work of

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

the Trinity within the new humanity, the Body of Christ, and through it, in the world.

Rublev's icon shows that there is no independence within the Trinity or in the one Church. "There is one body and **one Spirit**, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; **one Lord** [Jesus Christ] 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 within the Holy Trinity, diversely manifested by each of the Persons. 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 Blood"), and the Spirit completes or perfects our salvation (the hand pointing down toward the chalice, and toward the person entering 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 also 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. And 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.

The icon is also an icon of the Ascension, as the Eucharistic liturgy each Sunday and Feast Day also is ascension to heaven. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann emphasizes this in his writings, especially in His work *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*.¹¹ Our humanity is seated in Christ in the heavenly places, and participates in the life of God. And we are to seek those things which are above, where Christ is, for our life is hidden with Christ in God.¹² 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.

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. The 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 notes:

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

11. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

12. See Eph. 5:4-7; Philippians 3:8-11, 20-21; Col. 3:1-4.

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.¹³

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 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 Creation, the consummation of all things, the new creation.

Conclusion

Thus, in trying to express the Orthodox experience I propose that the origin, unity, goal and fulfillment of the Church and of her mission are all found in 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 the life of the Holy Trinity in order to be transfigured, and through this transfiguration the Church in turn, bears witness in the world of the new creation and eternal life in God.

The image of the Holy Trinity 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

¹³ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. II. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992, p. 399.

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 and in full and perfect oneness of mind and heart, even as the Persons of the Holy Trinity inter-penetrate one another in sharing one nature, and even as the Persons of the Holy Trinity inter-penetrate the life and mission of the Church.¹⁴

I offer this Orthodox vision regarding the relationship of Trinity, Church and mission as another perspective in which evangelical Protestants might possibly find something of value in their reflection on the issue of the relationship between independent ministries and the local church.

Some Resources for Further Exploration

1. *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."
2. "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.
3. "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.

14. 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*.

4. "God and Man in the Orthodox Church" and "Catholicity and Ecumenism," chapters 1 and 3 respectively in *All the Fullness of God: Essays on Orthodoxy, Ecumenism and Modern Society* by Fr. Thomas Hopko. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982.
5. *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.
6. *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, by Alexander Schmemmann. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988.
7. *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism* by Alexander Schmemmann. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974.
8. *Doors of Perception – Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* by John Baggley. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988.
9. *Theology of the Icon*, vol. 1 and 2 by Leonid Ouspensky. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992.
10. *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev* by Gabriel Bunge. Transl. Andrew Louth. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007.

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