I Believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church

Fr John A. Jillions
(The Sheptytsky Institute, Saint Paul University)
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St George’s Anglican Church, Ottawa

I would like to thank my colleague and friend Gregory Bloomquist for inviting me to be part of this series on the Creed, and in particular, to reflect with you on the Church. The Church has been a constant preoccupation of mine for decades, largely because of the tensions I feel being an Orthodox Christian in an ecumenical world. The basic question for me is this: where is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church? Where are its boundaries? And related to this, how do we relate its visible, historic reality to its invisible, spiritual, mystical reality? This is what I would like to think about today as an Orthodox Christian among Anglicans.

First an historical introduction. For those of you who don’t know the Orthodox Church, it is a body of churches from various cultural backgrounds—mostly Middle Eastern and Eastern European, but now also with significant numbers of North American converts—that share the same doctrine, worship, faith, saints and are in communion with each other and the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Orthodox Church goes back to the beginning: many places mentioned in the NT are still functioning predominantly as Orthodox Christian communities. Thessalonica for example, in Greece. The earliest writing we have in the NT is probably Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, and there are about a million modern Thessalonians today. I did my PhD in NT at the University of Thessalonica and lived there for a year. The city is dotted with scores of Orthodox churches, and monasteries. I can assure you that the local Christians feel their unbroken connection to the church of St Paul’s era. So do the Beroeans, of modern Veria, a small town 100 kilometers away. You remember that Paul fled to Berea after poor treatment in Thessalonica, Acts 17: “The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to
Beroe'a; and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11-12). There’s still a little civic rivalry there. The official motto of modern Veria is “more noble than the Thessalonians.” Throughout the Orthodox world there is deep consciousness of its historical roots in earliest Christianity and the church of the first millennium. The official break with the Latin West came in 1054, and today there are about 300 million Orthodox worldwide, the largest being the Russian Orthodox Church.

Back now to my story. My whole life has been shaped by the worship, tradition, saints and spirituality of the Orthodox Church. My mother is Russian, my great-grandfather was a priest in Russia, we went to the Orthodox church wherever we lived, and as a university student at McGill, the Christ I discovered by God’s grace and mercy was the Christ I encountered in the Orthodox Church. My reading of the New Testament is shaped by the resonances that come from hearing it read and meditated upon in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. I can’t read or hear the Passion Gospels and Resurrection accounts without powerful images and memories of the beautiful services, hymns, incense and traditions of Holy Week and Easter. And at the same time, for decades I have been powerfully aware of the authentic Christian life that I’ve encountered everywhere in other Christian churches. I have had close dealings with Roman Catholics, Eastern Catholics, Methodists, Evangelicals and especially Anglicans (I lived eight years in Cambridge and was regularly at Anglican services, and the hymns often moved me deeply; and my late father was English, a lapsed Anglican of integrity—he refused confirmation at age 12—who couldn’t be pulled away from evensong at Ely Cathedral when he visited). But when it comes to thinking about the meaning of these words in the Creed about the Church there’s a question. Can I bring together the life-giving experience of Christ I’ve encountered in the Orthodox Church with what I’ve also experienced with other Christians? I can’t yet find the words to bring these two real experiences together. And this is because while the Christian world at large may debate the precise meaning of these words—one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church—mainstream Orthodox thought makes it very clear that there is NO debate on this point. Stated most baldly the claim is this: the historical Orthodox Church is the One, Holy,
Catholic and Apostolic Church \cite{slides}: terms; Emperor Theodosius at 1 Constantinople; Theodosian Code; Orthodox timelines of church history; an Orthodox “icon” of the True Church and those who would pull her off course.

This doesn’t mean the Orthodox Church isn’t interested in church unity. In fact, the mainstream Orthodox churches have been participants in the modern ecumenical movement since the beginning. But the rationale for this is based fundamentally on the Orthodox Church’s missionary duty to witness to the fullness of the Christian faith in hope that other churches will gradually lay aside their doctrinal deviations (and this includes moral theology), converge around the apostolic faith preserved and nurtured in Orthodoxy, and become Orthodox. The Orthodox Churches are willing—in varying degrees—to work, pray and study with other Christians toward the goal of full Christian unity. They are willing to engage in respectful dialogue and collaboration with other Christians. They are willing to recognize that the Holy Spirit continues to work in some measure among other Christians and that in God’s providence the Church extends mysteriously, in an indefinable way, beyond the canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church. They are willing to even admit that the Orthodox do not have a monopoly on truth and that the historical life of the Orthodox Church has been fraught with sins, including sins against the unity of the Church. But these historical faults on the part of its members, it is argued, do not touch the inner purity of its life and holiness, which depends on God, not on human beings. The Orthodox Church, therefore, remains “the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” and restoration of Christian unity means incorporation of the heterodox into the fullness of the Orthodox Church. And until that happens, until there is complete doctrinal agreement there can be no intercommunion, because sharing in the Eucharist is the final sign of restored unity.

Ignoring serious differences in doctrinal and moral teaching, in favor of a sentimental approach based on friendly feelings and fellowship would only give the illusion of unity. Such “romantic” ecumenism also breaks faith with the cloud of witnesses of the Christian past, the saints who are equally members of the Church, alive in the risen Christ. Today’s ecumenism in space between churches across the globe must be accompanied by an ecumenism in time that remains faithful to the unbroken teaching of the undivided church.
Connected with this is the insistence that restoration of full sacramental Christian unity depends fundamentally on restoring a common mind on Christian doctrine through patient study and dialogue. Indeed, without this, there can be no joint sacramental communion.

This all seems quite categorical. There is little room here for incorporating my experience with other Christians into this vision of the Church. And that was my dilemma, until I discovered that even within the Orthodox world, there are voices from the early and mid-20th century that questioned this and offered a different prophetic way forward. They are not being listened to yet, but I hope they will get a second hearing in the 21st century. Among them, I would like to introduce you to two, the Orthodox theologians and scholars, Fr Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944) and Nicholas Zernov (1898-1980).¹

Fr Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944)

Sergius Bulgakov was first dean of St Sergius Institute, the influential Orthodox school of theology in Paris, established in 1925. A former Marxist, prominent convert to Christianity, expelled from the Soviet Union, hugely prolific theological writer, early ecumenist, he became frustrated with the slow progress toward church unity. He came up against the same brick wall I continue to encounter: the Orthodox understanding of the Church could not encompass his experience of other Christians in the West. Nor did the ecumenical movement, with its doctrinal debates and dialogues, seem to offer a promising way forward. Couldn’t there be another way to approach church unity? What if, instead of starting with doctrine we start with the Eucharist? Isn’t that another way to bring us eventually to the same desired point of unity in Christ? This could be especially fruitful between churches—like Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican—that already largely shared the same view of the Eucharist.

What is required for a complete reunion, and where do we start? The predominant formula runs: sacramental fellowship must be preceded by a preliminary dogmatic agreement. But is this axiom so indisputable as it appears? Here on one scale of the balance we have a difference in certain Christian dogmas and theological opinions, and an estrangement that has been formed through centuries; on the other we have the unity of sacramental life. May it not be that a unity in the sacrament will be the only way toward overcoming this difference? Why should we not seek to surmount a heresy in teaching through superseding a heresy of life, such as division? May it not be that Christians sin now by not heeding the common Eucharistic call?²

Bulgakov insists that this is no shortcut to avoid dogmatic divisions. On the contrary, this proposal is an eminently practical way to address divisions directly and to overcome them not through debate but through mutual love and shared life. Already in the 1930s he could see that ecumenical discussions were leading nowhere. Indeed, not only have “tournaments of theologians” proven incapable of erasing divisions, they have even reinforced them.

[The] way toward the reunion of East and West does not lie through tournaments between theologians of the East and West, but through a reunion before the altar. The priesthood of the East and the West must realize itself as one priesthood, celebrating the one Eucharist; if the minds of the priests could become aflame with this idea, all barriers would fall. For in response to this dogmatic unity will be achieved, or rather a mutual understanding of one another in our distinctive features. In necessarías unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas—’In what is necessary unity, in what is of lesser importance freedom, in all things, love.’³

³ “By Jacob’s Well,” 65.
Nicholas Zernov (1898-1980)

Nicholas Zernov was Bulgakov’s student and took his ideas further, but also died without seeing this vision of church unity taken up. After leaving Russia in 1921 Zernov studied theology in Belgrade with many of the leading lights of Russian émigré intelligentsia and became a founder (with help from the YMCA) of the Russian Student Christian Movement. On a scholarship from the Anglican Church he studied at Oxford and received his D Phil in 1932 for a dissertation on ‘The Unity of the Church and the Re-union of the Churches.’ After a brief period in Paris he returned to England and in 1947 was named first Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies at Oxford. He was very active ecumenically and was one of the founders of the fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius that brings together Christian of east and west, especially Anglicans and Orthodox.

Zernov proposed the most comprehensive Orthodox plan for Christian reunion. By the late 1950’s, like many early participants in the ecumenical movement, he had become disappointed by the slow progress and wondered if there wasn’t something fundamentally wrong with the dialogue approach.

Building on the insights of Bulgakov and others, Zernov advocated a prophetic approach that would submit the ecumenical impasses to what he called “Divine arbitration”. By this he meant permitting ecumenical Christians to have communion together and asking God to unite them into one mind.

It is obvious that under current conditions neither side is able to appreciate the viewpoint of the other, and no amount of theological discussion can bring them closer together. The only solution of this conflict is to submit it to Divine arbitration by allowing those Christians who are working for reunion to enter into communion with one another. By sanctioning this step for those who are willing to undertake it, the Church authorities on both sides would manifest their willingness to present their age-long disputes to God’s judgment and would express their trust in the power of the Divine wisdom to illuminate
the hearts and minds of the divided Christians and to guide them towards the solution of unresolved oppositions in their teaching and discipline.⁴

Zernov admits that such a proposal “is bound to raise strong protests in some quarters”. But once the churches have become tired of the stalemate Zernov hoped that his proposal might “elicit warm support from those Eastern and Western Christians who believe that with God’s help the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the Orthodox and Roman versions of Catholicity can be solved…Intercommunion might be able to illuminate from a new angle those stumbling blocks which at present obstruct the road to reconciliation.”⁵

The hope of reintegration rests not so much on the return to some arbitrarily chosen point in the past, but on a generous forward movement inspired by confidence in the guiding and healing power of the Holy Spirit which makes all things new.⁶

The World Council of Churches could also take this as its new point of departure instead of leaving progress in unity up to theological debate.

There is no more glaring example of the present predicament of the Ecumenical Movement than the place in it of Holy Communion. Instead of being the source of oneness, it is kept in the background as a cause of contention. The leaders of the World Council hope to restore unity by their own efforts; trusting in the common sense and good will of their members whilst the contesting confessions rely upon the learning and eloquence of their authorized spokesmen.⁷

Like Bulgakov, he is fully aware that the conventional view is that there can be shared communion only with complete agreement in faith and in episcopacy, or to put it bluntly “the only way of reconciliation open to lapsed Christians is submission to the true Church.” But there must be another way through the transforming power of the Eucharist. As a practical first step,

⁵ Zernov, *Orthodox Encounter*, 177-8.
⁷ Zernov, *Orthodox Encounter*, 125.
assuming that complete intercommunion between all churches is still unrealistic, Zernov advocates that the Orthodox Church should itself take the initiative in generosity and open its doors to communion.

Christians who profess the Orthodox faith, but are members of the heterodox Churches, could be strengthened in their desire for reconciliation by being admitted as communicants to the Orthodox Eucharist without being separated from their own Churches. Such an action might accelerate the process of the reintegration of the Church, and the same results are likely to be achieved if some Orthodox were authorized by their bishops to participate in the communion services of those separated confessions which seek unity with their Mother Church.  

Something has to change. Zernov was afraid that the movement toward Christian unity had stagnated. Christians were so accustomed to their divisions that they didn’t see what impact their fragmentation was having on mission. In an increasingly hostile and skeptical world such divisions are a sure sign of Christianity’s pettiness and parochialism. The various Christian churches need each others’ gifts and strengths, and to accomplish this, it’s time for the Church to restore its true catholicity and become once again “a universal Eucharistic fellowship.”

The future Christian civilization depends on the revival of the church, which once more must become a universal Eucharistic fellowship consisting of people who are drawn to the encounter with the living God. Christians of east and west need each other. They are complementary in their achievements and limitations.

Contemporary Christians are so accustomed to identifying the Church with a single confessional expression that they are reluctant to participate in a richer and more varied sacramental life; yet the Church needs the discipline and universality of Rome, the depth and richness of Orthodox worship, the ecumenical generosity of the Anglicans, the warm fellowship of the Methodists and the sense of personal responsibility and freedom of

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8 Zernov, *Orthodox Encounter*, 187.
other Protestants. Christians as a whole no longer understand the true catholicity of the Church.\textsuperscript{10}

In his family memoirs, Zernov ends the long account with a reflection on the church and ecumenical commitments that have woven through the decades of his life. Throughout, it is clear what deep love he has for the Orthodox Church and all that it has given him through years of revolution, war and exile. Indeed, its profound spiritual life flowered most in times of stress and persecution. Miraculous icons, extraordinary pastors and preachers, the intelligentsia returning to faith. Even so, Zernov is not convinced that the Orthodox tradition alone, even at its best, is sufficient to encompass the full universality of the Christian church. The churches need each other.

In the days of my youth, when I first found the church, I was impatient in my zeal for the truth. I was convinced that only we, the Orthodox, and the Russians in particular, had preserved the authentic apostolic tradition and had the fullness of the sacraments. I wanted to save everyone else by bringing them into Orthodoxy. But gradually I became convinced that we don’t have a monopoly on truth.

My acquaintance with the non-Orthodox gave me the possibility of meeting a stream of leading western Christians—deeply thoughtful people with sacrificial hearts and holiness of life. They placed before me the mystery of the church’s division. I came to be convinced that it was no accident that the Providence of God allowed the members of the Church to lose their agreement. Right now, throughout the world the ecumenical movement has begun to reunite the broken pieces of the Church. This is a difficult but necessary schooling to lead us all to a fuller understanding of truth than was accessible to us as divided Christians on our own.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Nicholas Zernov, \textit{Orthodox Encounter}, 168.
\textsuperscript{11} Nicholas and Militza Zernov (Eds.), \textit{Za Rubezhom: Belgrad, Parizh, Oksford; Chronika cem’i Zernovykh} [Abroad: Belgrade-Paris-Oxford (a Chronicle of the Zernov family)], Paris: YMCA press, 1973, 556.
Conclusion

I find myself in deep sympathy with Zernov’s views and need for Orthodox openness to new approaches and possibilities. His successor as Spalding Lecturer at Oxford (1966-2001) was Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia. In 2008 he was at the Anglican Lambeth Conference as an observer representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate and was interviewed about the controversial topics then being addressed, the ordination of women as bishops, the ordination of practicing homosexuals as clergy and the blessing of same-sex unions. He remarked that when facing decisions on any new issue the Church must be attentive to keeping a balance between “catholic consensus” and “prophetic action”. If the Orthodox have stressed consensus in the past, they must nevertheless remain open to the possibility of Spirit-inspired change coming from the most unexpected places.

Will you ever have change unless some people are willing to stand up and say, this is what we ought to be doing? And even if their testimony is highly controversial, who will nonetheless stand by their position. It could be argued that perhaps the Anglican Communion was guided by the Holy Spirit to lead other Christians into new paths. Now I can see that as a valid argument and I want to balance that against the point that we need to act with catholic consensus.

How can we do both these things together - preserve catholic consensus, and yet allow grace for freedom in the Holy Spirit? Christ did not tell us that nothing should ever be done for the first time. The whole witness of the early Church points in a different direction. So how do you balance these two things - the need for consensus with the need for freedom in the Spirit, the need for loyalty to holy tradition, with the need to be open to new initiatives? 12

Last week I was in a class at Saint Paul University, guest-teaching with the Revd Kevin Flynn, director of the Anglican Studies program, and he spoke about Richard Hooker’s attempt

to take a wider view of Church in the 16th century Anglican world. Looking at the wonderful diversity and vastness of the universe God had created, Hooker stressed “the abundance of God’s glory” and that “God’s boundaries are large.” This has clear implications for how we learn from each other and set boundaries in this society of the Church. As Archbishop Rowan Williams has written about Hooker,

The fundamental motor of his thought remains his theology of Christ's Body – that society, the model of every true and functioning society, in which we are constantly learning how to receive at each other's hands and to become ourselves in God's sight, through the crosses and resurrections of 'sociable' existence.13

I will leave the final word to the prophet Jeremiah. He reminds us that the Church belongs not to us but to God. We need always to be ready for Him to reshape it anew.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ‘Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.’ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: ‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel’ (Jer. 18.1-6 RSV).

Suggestions for further reading


Ware, Timothy (Kallistos), The Orthodox Church, London: Penguin, 1993.

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(The Sheptytsky Institute, Saint Paul University)
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Terms

Church: God’s people, “called out”, Body of Christ, “pillar and bulwark of truth” (1 Tim 3:15)

One: because God, in Trinity, is One

Holy: because God is holy

Catholic: full, complete, whole, lacking nothing (because of God’s Spirit), “the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23)

Apostolic: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21)
Emperor Theodosius I (347-395)
Emp. Theodosius at I Constantinople (381)
The Theodosian Code

380 AD
Everyone in the empire shall be part of the religion that believes in God as a single Deity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity, as taught by St. Peter to the Romans, and now taught by Damasus of Rome and Peter of Alexandria. Only those following this rule shall be called “catholic Christians.” Meeting places of those who follow another religion (including heretics of a Christian variety) shall not be given the status of churches, and such people may be subject to both divine and earthly retribution. (Feb. 28 CT 16.1.2 167 Gratian, Valentinian II, Theodosius I)

The Church: an Orthodox Timeline

http://www.kurskroot.com/asset.jpg
Another Orthodox Timeline

[Diagram showing the timeline of the development of Christianity, including key events and periods such as the Reformation, the Crusades, and the formation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.]
A Traditionalist Orthodox “icon” of the True Church
Fr Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944)

Ecumenical Pioneer,
Dean of St Sergius Institute (Paris),
1925-44
Nicholas Zernov (1898-1980)

Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies, Oxford (1947-66)

(with his wife Militza)
Kallistos Ware

Metropolitan of Diokleia, Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies, Oxford (1966-2001)
Richard Hooker (c 1554-1600)

- The Abundance of God’s Glory
- God’s Boundaries are Large

The fundamental motor of his thought remains his theology of Christ's Body – that society, the model of every true and functioning society, in which we are constantly learning how to receive at each other's hands and to become ourselves in God's sight, through the crosses and resurrections of 'sociable' existence.

(Abp Rowan Williams)
A Church of Clay?

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References


Rowan Williams, “Richard Hooker (c1554-1600): The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity Revisited,” www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/987