

“Preserve the Fullness of Thy Church”: Fighting Fundamentalism, Defending Dialogue, and Reclaiming Catholicity

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I was a first-year seminarian when Saint Vladimir’s Seminary celebrated its fortieth anniversary banquet on May 5, 1978. Father Georges Florovsky was specially honored. He was frail and I don’t recall whether he spoke, but his presence was enough to signal something of a reconciliation after decades of very public estrangement from Saint Vladimir’s and its dean, Father Alexander Schmemmann.

Fifteen months later, Father Georges reposed in the Lord, on August 11, 1979. His funeral on August 14th was held at Saint Vladimir Church in Trenton, New Jersey, where he had concelebrated the liturgy on Sundays and on feast days throughout much of the 1970s alongside the rector, Father Paul Shafran, his friend and former student, now 99 years old. Father Schmemmann was there for the funeral together with a few singers from the seminary choir, including me, but the gathering of mourners seemed relatively small considering Father Georges’s enormous impact. Two weeks later, I was part of a crew of seminarians sent back to Princeton to pack up his substantial collection of books, much of which he donated to Saint Vladimir’s Seminary, to what is today named the Father Georges Florovsky Library.

We spent all day packing up, and in the clothes closet he had transformed with bookshelves I discovered rows of document boxes labelled with the names of scholars, many from pre-revolutionary Russia, containing neatly Xeroxed copies of their articles. To my great surprise and eternal gratitude, one of the boxes was filled with articles by the great New Testament scholar of the Moscow Theological Academy, Mitrofan Muretov, who was the subject of the Master of Divinity thesis I was researching right at that time under Professor Veselin Kesich and Father John Meyendorff. In this posthumous way, Father Georges was of immense help to me. For anyone interested, the most recent issue of the journal *Sobornost* includes my article based on that thesis.¹

Sobornost, the Russian word for “catholicity,” brings me to my main subject. Muretov sharply criticized attempts to reduce the fullness of the Church to this or that particular feature, because particularity eats away at the Church’s catholicity. He thought this was precisely the problem of individualism in the western confessions. A generation later, Father Georges, too, like Muretov and many other leading lights of Russian theology from at least

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¹ John A. Jillions, “Biblical Scholarship in Pre-Revolutionary Russia: Mitrofan Muretov (1850–1917),” *Sobornost* 42.1–2 (2021): 106–32.

Aleksei Khomiakov onward, was deeply committed to sobornost both as the expression of divine fullness in the Church and as *the* distinguishing feature of Orthodox Christianity. I'll elaborate on Florovsky's understanding of catholicity below, but first I will set out the open threat to catholicity that I see menacing the Orthodox Church, at least in the United States. I hope to do this without embittering or embarrassing others, but I ask forgiveness in advance for any offense, and hope that together we can do the difficult work of "[maintaining] the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Catholicity Under Threat

In 1999, I was an observer at the triennial All American Council of the Orthodox Church in America, held that year in Pittsburgh. Jaroslav Pelikan, the great scholar of church history and a late-in-life convert to Orthodox Christianity, was the keynote speaker. In the Q and A following his talk to the assembly of bishops, clergy, and parish representatives—more than a thousand people in all—he was asked what he saw as the greatest threat to the Orthodox Church. Without hesitation he answered: "The loss of its catholicity." This remark, from one of the twentieth century's foremost scholars of the Christian tradition, stuck with me as prescient. I was visiting from England, where I was serving as principal of the newly founded Cambridge Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies and a priest under Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, and on that visit, I already felt acutely the suffocating closing-in of a less generous Orthodoxy in the United States. Pelikan reposed in 2006, but twenty-three years after his keynote address, the loss of catholicity is not just a threat. It's a crusade.

Ironically, the threat to the Church's fullness comes now not from external forces of secularism, but from those within the Church who out of well-meaning but misguided desire to protect their vision of Holy Tradition are taking a chainsaw to catholicity, starting with the purge of suspected enemy-scholars. Invariably their immediate focus is on issues of sexual morality, but their attacks are ultimately an assault on catholicity.

As an illustration of this disturbing trend, I came across a long and articulate Facebook post by a senior priest in a position of leadership, pointing out the subtle dangers of what he calls "academic obfuscation."

This is not a matter where someone hears or reads one sentence and then calls the bishop and says, "this man is a heretic." Rather, it's the persistent influence of websites like *The Wheel*, *Orthodoxy in Dialogue*, and *Public Orthodoxy*, that use highly technical and academic obfuscation to begin pushing boundaries in areas where the church has been very clear. It's assertions like "science" is proving the church's teaching "wrong" on homosexual attraction, and numerous other statements that make it clear that these like-minded individuals have a much larger, more sinister agenda. They know what they're doing, and they know how to do it in such a way that it becomes difficult to pin them down. They use "questions" and "dialogue" and "discussions" to little-by-little push the boundaries so that the larger Orthodox community will accept their ideas. They do these things under the guise of "academic freedom" as a cover for their machinations.

He goes on:

Yes, we know the names of these “teachers.” We know every one of them. They are being watched, carefully, by those of us who are like-minded and see the need to stop them. But the bishops have been far too reticent to act. There are only a few priests who have the courage to speak up, sadly. The laity needs to take a more active role in speaking out and pushing back so that such false teaching can be cleaned out of the Orthodox Church.

This priest is not an outlier. He represents the widespread opinion of many Orthodox clergy and laity, as can easily be seen on a casual stroll through Orthodox cyberspace. The point I want to underline tonight is that these sorts of relentless attacks are hacking away at the catholicity of the Orthodox Church. This is the threat that Jaroslav Pelikan warned us about. They are attacking the most basic assumptions and tools for the pursuit of truth: questions, dialogue, discussions, and freedom of thought. How can the fullness of the Christian faith flourish in such a hostile atmosphere?

Indeed, hostility is being ramped up throughout the Orthodox world, but I’ll focus on Orthodoxy in the United States. Most troubling to me is that this militant version of Orthodoxy is being promoted by the president of Saint Vladimir’s Seminary. In a podcast titled “Preparing to Serve in a Hostile World,” Father Chad Hatfield speaks very bluntly to students in the Orthodox Inter-Seminary Movement, which represents many Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States. He warns that his remarks could be controversial, but he wants students to know about the world they will be

servicing. He asserts that people are running away from “anemic churches” that aren’t presenting the rigorous demands of “the full gospel.” The world is becoming aggressively anti-Christian, he says, and he points to the well-known Orthodox conservative controversialist Rod Dreher’s books *The Benedict Option* and *Live Not By Lies* as essential reading for seminarians to “survive and thrive” in this battle against what he calls “the collapse of our moral fabric.” Father Chad goes further and targets the internal enemies of the Church, who, he says, are aiding and abetting Orthodoxy’s own moral collapse. They are a dangerous new movement, he says, and labels them the “Accommodationist Movement.”

The Accommodationist Movement, in the Orthodox Church here in America, is probably best known, best centered at *Public Orthodoxy*, which is part of Fordham University’s fabric. It gets a lot of attention, but what does the Accommodationist Movement stand for? It means embracing the *Zeitgeist*. If you don’t know what that means, it’s a nice German word which means “the spirit of the age.” Lord Acton once said, “He who weds the *Zeitgeist* soon finds himself a widower.” What are they after in the Accommodationist Movement? That is to dial everything down in the Orthodox world, because if you’re full-blooded and present the full faith of the Church they think that puts people off. I’d say, look at the example of mainline Protestant Christianity, which is in enormous, serious decline. If the Accommodationist Movement in Orthodoxy is following that style, then we will find ourselves totally empty,

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because an Accommodationist Church has nothing to offer an anxious world. So, I'm not projecting for you a world of doom and gloom, but I am projecting the reality of what you are going to be facing, and part of being in seminary is you're toughening yourself up and getting ready to be the best Orthodox Christian apologist for the faith that you can find anywhere in the world, because the twenty-first century challenges are waiting for you.²

I respect Father Chad and consider him a colleague, as I do folks at the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University—I have taught and written for both schools—and have worked and served with Father Chad in various ways for more than a decade. But this kind of language applied to fellow Orthodox Christians, scholars, and whole institutions is frightening, which is why it needs to be called out, because Saint Vladimir's Seminary is beloved by many, is one of the leading Orthodox seminaries in the world and one of the foremost publishers of Orthodox theological books in any language. And from its start in 1938 it has been at the forefront of Orthodox thought and engagement with the world.

Father Chad picked up this aggressive theme again when he invited Rod Dreher to give the annual Father Alexander Schmemmann Memorial Lecture at the seminary on January 30th, 2021. In response, some thirty-five alumni wrote to the seminary's Board of Trustees to question this choice (I was one of them), not to "de-platform" Dreher, as he later claimed—which would obviously be antithetical to the freedom of thought we should be promoting—but to raise the alarm and open a conversation. Quoting from the letter:

The seminary's selection of Mr. Dreher for this important lecture series appears to signal an embrace of a particular brand of sectarian politics and to suggest its infusion into the seminary's program of theological and pastoral formation. We would hate to see a generation of SVS graduates become disciples of a politicized religion. We hope instead that Mr. Dreher's lecture will serve as an overture for ongoing dialogue with those who address the issues he raises from a variety of measured perspectives and with more evident theological grounding and nuance.

There was no substantive response from the Seminary much beyond acknowledgement of receipt. Instead, on the day of the lecture, Father Chad doubled down. He noted that Dreher, like Father Alexander Schmemmann, "is giving us a warning about the danger of creeping secularism." Now however, said Father Chad, the battle is less with outside forces than destructive forces within the Orthodox Church: "*Our* house now needs to be put in order."

Dreher, too, began combatively by thanking all those Orthodox who "tried to get me de-platformed, since you are helping me make my case." Later he explicitly targeted Fordham's *Public Orthodoxy* and others, saying: "I only engage people who come to me in good faith and are willing to listen. I don't waste my time with those who don't. It's not worth it. I'm not interested. I don't grant legitimacy to those who are just trolling me or trying to own conservatives."

He said that such people "cannot be reasoned with, only conquered, because they have ceased to care

² Chat Hatfield, "Preparing to Serve in a Hostile World," *Voices from St Vladimir's*, November 8, 2020, Ancient Faith Ministries, https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/svsvoices/preparing_to_serve_in_a_hostile_world.

about reality and the truth.” He said, “we cannot abandon biblical teaching; this is what the contemporary ‘Living Church’ has done, or rather the ‘Zombie Church,’ who are the modern ‘Renovationists,’” referencing the Soviet-backed reform group that was set up in opposition to Patriarch Tikhon in the early years after the Russian Revolution in 1917. “Don’t dialogue with them,” he said. “This is a trap. Don’t fall for it.” “You cannot have dialogue with our contemporary renovationists.” There can be no dialogue between truth and falsehood. Dialogue with them will kill you: it’s truth laced with poisoned Kool-Aid.” He told the seminarians that they would need to “wage intense struggle to de-program your congregations from the post-Christian juggernaut.”

The most disturbing aspect of Dreher’s lecture was his explicit rejection of dialogue with Orthodox Christians he views as no longer worthy of conversation. I think Dreher has some important observations about American religious life, and I’ve assigned *The Benedict Option* as required reading for the Doctor of Ministry course I taught at Saint Vladimir’s on “Ministry in a Secular Age.” But he is dead wrong about refusing to engage with his fellow Orthodox who disagree with him. Dreher and company view engagement as contamination. Others, more charitably, feel they don’t have the time to waste on discussing what they believe to be settled principles. In either case, whether from disdain or disinterest, communion is broken and the Church’s catholicity is compromised.

I’m not entirely unsympathetic to the opponents of dialogue, because there is biblical rationale for walking away from some engagements. John the Theologian is “the apostle of love,”

but for him love does not necessarily mean sharing the Eucharist, a meal, or even a greeting with counterfeit Christians who deny Jesus Christ’s commandment of love and do not acknowledge his coming in the flesh. As he writes in his second letter,

If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. (2 John 10–11)

Saint Paul takes a similar view (see Rom. 16:17, 1 Cor. 16:22, Gal. 1:8, Eph. 5:11, 2 Thess. 3:6, and Titus 3:10).³ That said, it is dangerous to decide prematurely who is an enemy of the Church rather than a brother or sister in the faith.⁴ It is all too easy to pin a label quickly and to cut off conversation and communion. Who are you to declare this or that person as unworthy of your listening, conversation, and dialogue? Who declares someone to be not worth the effort?—or, worse, dangerous? A synod of bishops? A single bishop? A seminary? A group of like-minded clergy on Facebook? A popular speaker or writer? History shows repeatedly that even a council of bishops can be very wrong, and no council can be declared “ecumenical” until the later judgment of the Church. There is much wisdom in not declaring judgements “before the time,” as Saint Paul says (1 Cor. 4:5). Otherwise, we commit what Father Florovsky called “the sin of the Reformation,” namely, “the destruction of catholic consciousness.” This is a point that needs to be underlined, italicized, and put in bold.

Let me illustrate what I mean. In the early 1990s I was pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Rahway, New Jersey, and attended an ecumenical

³ See John A. Jillions, “Love and Curses: Searching St. Paul for a Vision of Ecumenism,” *Sobornost* 20.1 (1998): 49–63, condensed and reprinted in *Theology Digest* 47.2 (1999): 109–16.

⁴ See John A. Jillions, “The Language of Enemies,” *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 50.3–4 (2009): 271–367.

Thanksgiving service at nearby Second Baptist Church. In conversation afterwards with one of the pastors, I said something about the unfortunate proliferation of churches in our small town, and she replied that no, separation is a sign of zeal, as individuals get fired up and fed up, walking away to establish new ministries. There's some truth in that, but it also demonstrates the "Protestant principle" that the individual is capable of discerning God's direction for the Church. This is the antithesis of catholicity. Ironically, Orthodox rigorists who refuse to engage with fellow Orthodox—however distasteful this might be—are unwittingly pursuing the path of America's rugged Protestant individualism.

This irony came home to me in a recent conversation with an evangelical Protestant pastor who was raised Greek Orthodox and is now—after 40 years—rediscovering his Orthodox roots. He told me it is precisely the relational, personal, Trinitarian dimension of Orthodoxy that so distinguishes it from the individualism of American evangelicalism. He said that it's the fierce attachment to individualistic freedom that undergirds evangelical Covid anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers. They've lost a sense of the relational, personal, Trinitarian, and communal. And this refusal to see themselves as part of a much wider human community to be protected has led to what has been called "Christian cruelty."⁵

This pastor told me he would be worried if this same individualistic spirit seeped into Orthodoxy through its converts. I told him that it's already happening. In 2017, David Bentley Hart put this phenomenon front and center in his Orthodoxy in America lecture at Fordham University. And now this new Orthodox individualism

has a Russian twist. Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, in her study of American converts to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) describes the post-Soviet, anti-Western ideology that is fueling the traditionalism of American converts, who see the Russian Church and the Russian State under Vladimir Putin as a bulwark against Western secularism.⁶

The picture I'm painting of conservative Orthodoxy, while troubling to some like me, is precisely what attracts many to the Orthodox Church in the United States. Raising questions is *not* why people are joining. They don't want questions, uncertainty, alternative views, or open-ended mystery. They want answers, security, certainty. They want "right thinking," "right opinion," "right worship," "right glory." They want "Orthodoxy." That's the brand. And seeing an influx of conservatives some have excitedly labelled our present day as "the Orthodox moment."

But others are dismayed. A friend of mine, a close observer of Orthodoxy and America, wrote in an email:

It almost seems like Orthodoxy in America is susceptible to the peculiarly American distortion of Christianity because it is guileless in some fundamental way, unable to recognize that it can be used, so to speak. Like it does not have the immunity from this American disease and could be in some sense wiped out or at least set back for a very long time by a detour into the particular cultural sickness that we in this country are only beginning to appreciate the extent and consequences of.

Another good clergy friend says, "I feel there's no place left for me in the

⁵ See Jonathan Merritt, "Some of the Most Visible Christians in America Are Failing the Coronavirus Test," *The Atlantic*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/christian-cruelty-face-covid-19/610477/>.

⁶ Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, "American Conservatives and the Allure of Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy," *Religions* 12.1036 (2021).

⁷ David Bentley Hart: "The Theologian is a Quiet Rioter," interview with Dmitry Biryukov, *Теоэстетика*, <https://theoaesthetics.ru/david-bentley-hart-the-theologian-is-a-quiet-rioter.html>.

Orthodox Church, given what I read and see.” And David Bentley Hart asks himself in an interview, “Would I convert today? Probably not. I probably would say of Orthodoxy—if this were all I knew—I’d say: Oh, well, Orthodoxy clearly isn’t what it used to be or what it might have been.”⁷

Reclaiming the Catholic Tradition

How did we get here? And can we reclaim the catholic tradition? Threats to the integrity of the Church aren’t new, and from the start the Church has had to wrestle with the balance between what Metropolitan Kallistos Ware calls catholic consensus and freedom in the Holy Spirit.⁸ In the first century, Saint Paul was both a challenger and an upholder of tradition. His intent was not to maintain received tradition as such—that was impossible given his new experience of Jesus Christ— but to pass on an emerging tradition now shaped by the new life in Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit. And the later church, in the face of constant threats to its fullness, sought to defend the apostolic tradition it had received, nurtured, and further developed. This is the main point of Jaroslav Pelikan’s monumental study of the Christian creeds, *Credo*. He affirmed the need for this development in Christian history but was also critical of its potential for ugliness when theological enemies are identified and repelled.

As Pelikan points out, the downside of protecting tradition is the demonizing of dissenters. As Christian history unfolded, the laws governing dissent, schismatics, heretics, and followers of other religions became increasingly restrictive, first within the Church and then in collaboration with the state under Emperor Constantine (272–337) and his successors. Gradually it



became illegal not only to go against the Creed but also to go beyond it. By the time of Emperor Theodosius the Great (347–395), diversity itself was proof of error, and the Theodosian Code used language that precluded the very idea of confessional diversity. This outlook, says Pelikan, found its way into every Christian creed and confession in East and West. Quoting Alfred North Whitehead, he says, “Where there is a creed, there is a heretic round the corner or in his grave.”⁹

The framework that emerged to protect Christianity’s integrity through canon, creed, and episcopacy focused on maintaining a supposedly unchanging capital-T Tradition. In this worldview, the very words “innovation,” “new,” and “change”

Descent of the Holy Spirit. Pskov school, Russia, 16th century.

⁸ George Westhaver, “Interview with the Most Rev. Kallistos Ware, Archbishop of Gt. Britain for the Ecumenical Patriarchate,” <https://virtueonline.org/lambeth-interview-most-rev-kallistos-ware-archbishop-gt-britain>.

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 187.

became expletives. Nevertheless, there was still surprising room for creativity. It was innovation by stealth, as succeeding generations of teachers and ecumenical councils kept repeating the mantra of tradition while at the same time introducing striking changes.¹⁰ Pelikan cites as examples the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea (325), with its introduction of the nonscriptural term *homoousios* (“one in essence”) to describe the union of the Father and the Son. The Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (431) endorsed the new term *Theotokos* (“God-bearer”) to describe the role of Mary.

Each time such an innovation was introduced, past texts were reread to find the inspired “new” doctrine or practice in the ancient tradition, thus showing unbroken continuity. This, of course, was the basic hermeneutical method in the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament. It was also fundamental to rabbinic interpretation, because it allowed the biblical text to remain sacredly unchanging while introducing new interpretations adapted to new contexts (the Messianic rereading of prophecy being the prime example for Christians).

Father Alexander Schmemmann taught that the Church changed in order to remain the same. But it was this ability to adapt to new situations and challenges that also often resulted in schism with the most conservative groups, who were gradually left behind. This was the case of those who opposed the new Trinitarian formulation as unbiblical or who objected to calling Mary the Theotokos. But it was also true of the Novationists (third century) and Donatists (fourth to sixth century), who broke communion with the rest of the Church not on theological grounds but for

being too lax toward sinners. These rigorists resisted the tide of pastoral compassion that swept through the wider church as it sought to deal with the thousands of Christians who had compromised or lapsed during times of persecution. The discipline of the Church, says Pelikan, was obliged to deal with violations of unity and love as well as with violations of faith and doctrine. Sadly, in their rigidity the traditionalists eventually found themselves on the wrong side of both history and the Church’s Tradition.¹¹

“Preserve the Fullness of Thy Church”

The biblical equivalent of catholicity is *plērōma*, “fullness,” one of Saint Paul’s key words in Ephesians and Colossians.¹² In Colossians, for example:

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness (*πλήρωμα*) of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness (*πεπληρωμένοι*) in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Col. 2:8–10)

Plērōma—fullness, catholicity—is about the cosmic immensity of the divine mystery and a refusal to narrow it down into bite-sized, humanly digestible pieces. Paul constantly resists teachers like the interlopers in Colossae who want to make the Church and its God so much smaller, more manageable, and more predictable. From beginning to end, the God of the Bible resists every form of idolatry, manipulation, and reduction, as my teacher, Father Paul Tarazi, always forcefully underlines. The scriptural

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 188–89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 291–92. See also John A. Jillions, *Divine Guidance: Lessons for Today from the World of Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 238–40.

¹² See Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). See, for example, Paul’s use of *plērōma* and related words in Rom 13:10, Col 1:19, 2:9–10, 4:12; Eph 1:23, 3:19, 4:13, 5:18.

God consistently chooses what is foolish and weak to shame the wise and strong, “so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor 1:29).

When I was a twenty-year-old undergraduate at McGill University contemplating going to seminary, I discovered a battered little paperback in a secondhand bookshop, *Your God is Too Small*, by the English biblical scholar and Anglican priest J. B. Phillips, published in 1952. He didn’t use the word “catholicity”, but he did convey the immensity of life in Christ, which leaves vast realms of mystery beyond our understanding.

When I finally did go to Saint Vladimir’s Seminary two years later, in 1977, one of the first courses was dogmatic theology, with Professor Sergei Verhovskoy, and from a completely different perspective, he picked up the theme of immensity, fullness, and mystery by assigning Dionysius the Areopagite’s (or Pseudo-Dionysius’s), *On the Divine Names*. This was the first theological book I read as a seminarian, and to be honest, I was frustrated by its density. I found it impenetrable for first-year students. Most of us had little or no background in philosophy. My undergrad courses were mostly in sciences and economics. I frankly preferred the Bible and wondered if evangelical Protestants weren’t right that the early church had been waylaid by too much philosophy. But as I later came to understand, impenetrability was the pedagogical point. Professor Verhovskoy was intent on giving us a lasting sense of the boundless immensity and incomprehensibility of God. Indeed, as Saint Paul says, “our knowledge is imperfect” (1 Cor. 13:9), and the sooner we learn this, the better. The Divine Liturgy, thankfully, preserves this sense of God’s vastness

and our limitations. “You are God, ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible . . . For all these things we give thanks to you, and to your only-begotten Son, and to your Holy Spirit; for all things of which we know and of which we know not, whether manifest or unseen.” At two points in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, we pray that this *plērōma* will endure: “Preserve the fullness of Thy Church,” τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας σου φύλαξον (prayer at the second antiphon and prayer before the ambo, echoing Eph. 1:22–23 and Col. 1:19).

I could go on and on with citations about fullness, apophatic theology, the limits of our knowledge, and the language in scripture, liturgy, and the patristic tradition beckoning engagement with what Saint Paul calls “the mystery of faith” (1 Tim. 3:9). But I’ll end this section by citing two contemporary bishops who express the aspirations and realities of mystery in Orthodoxy, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware and Bishop Seraphim Sigris.

In *The Orthodox Way*, Metropolitan Kallistos writes:

We go out from the known to the unknown, we advance from light into darkness. We do not simply proceed from the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge, but we go forward from the light of partial knowledge into a greater knowledge which is so much more profound that it can only be described as the “darkness of unknowing.” Like Socrates we begin to realize how little we understand. We see that it is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a

mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.¹³

But lived Orthodoxy does not always live up to this vision. In his book *Theology of Wonder*, Bishop Seraphim agrees that we Orthodox, at least in our patristic tradition and liturgy, do indeed have a sense of divine vastness and mystery, but he says “this wholeness is more often praised than manifested.” There is “a crisis of imagination in the Church today” and with this has come a “loss of the cosmic dimension.” Yet he also says this loss can be recovered by reclaiming “the way of our ‘negative theology’ with its emphasis on the limits of our knowledge, and therefore the need to leave space for multiple interpretations.”¹⁴

I would add that this sense of wonder, boundlessness, and mystery applies equally to human beings, created in the image and likeness of God. This was a point emphasized by Boris Vysheslavtsev, a teacher and colleague of Florovsky, Verhovskoy, Meyendorff, and Schmemmann at Saint Sergius Institute in Paris:

“God dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16), but man also discovers in his own depths an “unapproachable light.” This is the ultimate, sublime mystical element in his likeness to God. God is transcendent—and I myself am transcendent; God is mysterious and I myself am mysterious; there is a hidden God and a hidden man. We have a negative theology that points to the ultimate mystery of the Deity; there should also be a negative anthropology pointing to the mystery of man himself.¹⁵

Awareness of the limits of our knowledge goes hand in hand with

awareness of the possibility of eternal progress in knowledge, “from glory to glory” in Saint Paul’s words (2 Cor. 3:18). Bishop Seraphim says, “The essential point of eternal progress is that God’s creation, and what we see in Jesus, is not simply cyclic opening up and infolding but something different . . . an endless opening out.”¹⁶

When we confess in the Creed that the Church is *catholic*, we commit ourselves to wonder, mystery, and cosmic immensity, and to accepting with humility the limits of our present understanding of all truth, human and divine. And because of that humility, we can be open to new knowledge, new insights, multiple interpretations, and the possibility of eternal “growth in life and faith and spiritual understanding,” as the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom says in the second prayer of the faithful.

Defending Dialogue

I’ve talked about the fullness of the Church, current threats, and reclaiming catholicity. Now let me make the case for dialogue by returning to Father Georges Florovsky. His seminal article “Sobornost: The Catholicity of the Church” appeared in 1934 as part of an ecumenical collection of essays. Here he highlights the personal dimension of catholicity:

The *nature* of the Church is catholic; the very web of the Church’s body is catholic. The Church is catholic because it is the one body of Christ; it is in union in Christ, oneness in the Holy Ghost—and this unity is the highest wholeness and fullness. The gauge of catholic union is that “the multitude of them that believed be of one heart and soul” [Acts 4:32]. Where this is not the case, the

¹³ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1979), 16.

¹⁴ Seraphim Sigrist, *Theology of Wonder* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1999), 131–32.

¹⁵ B. P. Vysheslavtsev, *The Eternal in Russian Philosophy*, trans. Penelope Burt (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), 155–56.

¹⁶ Sigrist, *Theology of Wonder*, 73.

life of the Church is limited and restricted.¹⁷

Florovsky insists that self-sufficiency is a rejection of catholicity:

In ancient symbolism “roundness” was a sign of isolation, of self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction — *teres atque rotundus* [from Horace: “in himself entirely smooth and round,” *Satires* II.vii.86]. And it is just this spirit of self-satisfaction which hinders our entering the Church. The stone must first be made smooth, so that it can fit into the Church wall. We must “reject ourselves” to be able to enter the catholicity of the Church. We must master our self-love in a catholic spirit before we can enter the Church.¹⁸

In other words, our confession of catholicity means we also accept the ascetical task of setting aside self-sufficiency. Florovsky doesn’t underestimate how wrenching this is, and says that for the “old man” this is “unfathomable.” Citing Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky, he writes:

Personality in its carnal consciousness is a self-imprisoned existence, radically contrasted with every other personality. . . . Thus the Christian must *in the measure of his spiritual development* set himself free, making a direct contrast between the “ego” and the “non-ego” he must radically *modify the fundamental qualities of human self-consciousness* [Khrapovitsky, *The Moral Idea of the Dogma of the Church*, 1911].¹⁹

It is a life-long struggle to break out of “self-imprisoned existence” because it “entails the denial of individualistic separatism; it insists on catholicity.”

And this struggle applies as well to how the Church’s tradition is lived out in each generation:

Loyalty to tradition means not only *concord* with the past, but in a certain sense, *freedom from the past*, as some outward formal criterion. Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle; it is, primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration. . . . The Church bears witness to the truth not by reminiscence or from the words of others, but from its own living, unceasing experience, from its catholic fullness. . . . Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a *charismatic*, not a historical, principle.

According to Florovsky, even the Scriptures are not self-sufficient:

We cannot assert that Scripture is self-sufficient; and this not because it is incomplete, or inexact, or has any defects, but because Scripture in its very essence does not lay claim to self-sufficiency. We can say that Scripture is a God-inspired scheme or image (*eikon*) of truth, but not truth itself.²⁰

The notion of biblical self-sufficiency introduces a spirit of Protestant individualism that is antithetical to the catholicity and freedom of the Church, says Florovsky:

The liberty of the Church is shackled by an abstract biblical standard for the sake of setting free individual consciousness from the spiritual demands enforced by the experience of the Church. This is the denial of catholicity, a destruction of catholic

¹⁷ “Sobornost: The Catholicity of the Church,” in *The Church of God*, ed. E. Mascal (London: SPCK, 1934). The article forms chapter 3 of *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, vol. 1 in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972), 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

consciousness; this is the sin of the Reformation.²¹

But Florovsky is an optimist, and sets out a practical program for combating self-sufficiency and advancing catholicity:

Every work of fellowship and of concord is a path towards the realization of the catholic fulness of the Church. And this is pleasing in the sight of the Lord: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" [Matt 18:20].²²

We can see in this the rationale for his pioneering ecumenical engagement, and although the irascible Florovsky often had very public trouble putting the "work of fellowship and concord" into practice in his own personal and ecclesiastical life, we could profit from him today in facing the contemporary breakdown of Orthodox relationships around the world.

Fighting Fundamentalism

Let me turn now to "fighting fundamentalism," by which I mean fighting anything that undermines the catholicity and communion of the Church. This threat is the subject of an important collection of essays edited by Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos, *Fundamentalism or Tradition: Christianity after Secularism*. Here I would like to focus on the essay by Edith Humphrey, because she offers a constructive way to move forward in the Body of Christ. Her article is titled "Fundamentalism: Not Just a Cautionary Tale," and she says the simple but painful path of engagement begins with *listening*. This conclusion comes after a useful analysis of the problems surrounding the term "fundamentalism" and

of a too-swift dismissal of its alleged adherents. Both sides need to abandon polarization and listen more. "Rigorists need irenicists and vice versa," she says.²³

It's tough to do this. Staying together and staying engaged with each other while continuing to have substantive disagreements is uncomfortable. And the temptation is to either to avoid and run away or run roughshod over each other. But without this effort, our vaunted Orthodox Church life becomes a tribute to individualism and not catholicity. Father Thomas Hopko of blessed memory called this effort "the cross of collaboration." He often quoted St Anthony the Great: "Our life and our death is with our neighbor."

A few years ago, when I was chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America and serving on the boards of all three OCA seminaries, I very much appreciated receiving a letter from Father Chad Hatfield about the need for unifying our Orthodox theological education, something that had been spoken about for decades with little progress. He enclosed a 1962 letter from Father Alexander Schmemmann to a leading priest in Pittsburgh who, together with other area clergy, were partisans of St Tikhon's Seminary and had been riled up by some of the publicity materials coming out of St Vladimir's. Father Alexander wrote to reassure the priest, appeal for mutual understanding, and to raise the level of the conversation.

I am convinced that for our Church today nothing is more important than unity among clergy and that no effort should be spared in order to achieve this truly priestly unity in love and

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²² *Ibid.*, 50

²³ Edith Humphrey, "Fundamentalism: Not Just a Cautionary Tale," in ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos, *Fundamentalism or Tradition: Christianity after Secularism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 147.

mutual understanding. “Every city or house divided against itself shall not stand” (Matt. 12:25). . . .

A theological school is not an end in itself, but an instrument of the Church. One does not “belong” to St. Sergius, St. Tikhon’s, or St. Vladimir’s, one belongs to the Church and one serves the Church, not a “school.” The interests of the Church are above those of a Seminary and, therefore, no emotional consideration, personal attachment or sentimental feeling should influence us when we discuss the needs of the Church and the urgent problems of theological education. . . . Is it not possible for all of us to find a common ground, a common perspective—that of the interests of the Church, of her future, of her needs? . . .

We are at a crucial moment in the history of our Church. She needs the help and the support of all her children. Some day we will all disappear. But the Church will remain, needing every single stone we are trying to lay today.

Sixty years later, Father Schmemmann’s letter is still relevant and calls us to come together as living stones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I come back to my title, “Preserve the Fullness of Thy Church.” As I have mentioned, twice in the Divine Liturgy we ask God to preserve the *plērōma* of the Church. In Romans 13:10. Saint Paul links fullness with love of neighbor and a refusal to do harm: ἡ ἀγάπη τῷ πλησίον κακὸν οὐκ ἐργάζεται· πλήρωμα οὖν νόμου ἡ ἀγάπη. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Here David Bentley Hart’s translation conveys much better the breadth of the word *plērōma*: “love is the *full totality* of the law.”²⁴ Reclaiming catholicity is in the end about recovering love for one another, as banal as that may sound. And the enemy of both catholicity and love is individualism. Thomas Merton even calls it the *heresy* of individualism, and it is a seductive power. May God help us resist the instinct to cancel our brothers and sisters. Engaging them may be uncomfortable, risky, and unsettling, but in Christ, they’re worth it. They are not a waste of time. ✽

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²⁴ David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: a Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 313.



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