

The Orthodox Fraternity

Denys Clément

Translated by Liesl Coffin Behr

The Orthodox Fraternity in Western Europe was born and took form in a specific historical context: the arrival in Western Europe of immigrants from several Orthodox countries. There were the Greeks and Russians first, then Serbs, Romanians, and Lebanese. The settlement of these Orthodox Christians in Western Europe resulted in the juxtaposition of several jurisdictions, each representing its ethnic group. For psychological reasons (such as the uprootedness of the immigrant) and cultural ones (such as the association of nation and religion) these groups tended to become self-enclosed communities. Their Orthodox Christianity increasingly came to represent an element of cultural identity more than religious faith.

Then a number of notable figures, both clergy and laypeople, originating mostly from the Russian diaspora of the 1920s, initiated a rediscovery and a revitalisation of Orthodox theology and spirituality. Their vision: an Orthodox Christianity of living witness, open to modernity and willing to overcome nationalist and jurisdictional tensions. In this spirit Saint Sergius Institute was founded. Continuing the project of spiritual renewal, a second generation strove to unify all Orthodox Christians, regardless of their national origins and jurisdictional allegiances, and to integrate the Orthodox faith better into

its contemporary social context. Thus was constituted, in the sixties, the *Fraternité orthodoxe*, first in France and then in Western Europe more broadly (including Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and England).

Its inception corresponded with two major events, one within the Catholic Church—the Second Vatican Council—and the other in French civil society—the uprising of May 1968. This Orthodox generation witnessed the Catholic initiative to dust off the Church, and several French Orthodox Christians participated in commissions to organize and reflect on the Vatican council. In parallel, civil society experienced the uprising of May '68 as a rupture with an old world and a questioning of traditional institutions. Thus the Orthodox Fraternity emerged. It gathered a whole new generation, and was invigorated by the diverse movements already nascent around figures such as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Father Cyrille Argenti, Father Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and Paul Evdokimov. These visionaries wished to bear witness, together, to a living tradition that was open to modernity and acted in love and respect for cultural diversity. That is to say, they wished to realize a truly undivided Church.

The Fraternity is neither a “parallel church,” nor a movement, nor a fed-



eration. It is a vehicle of encounter, reflection, and prayer, destined in particular to come to the aid of the dispersed, those isolated from communal parishes. In view of this purpose, the Orthodox Fraternity is organized around a flexible structure that lends itself to a simple, participatory organization, with the basic necessary legal and financial structures. Thus, regional “Orthodox fraternities” are organized as extensions of a central organization, headquartered in Paris, and are of a common spirit. In France itself, many parishes have been reinvigorated, even created by members of the Fraternity. Some have gone on to organize regional gatherings, in the west, southwest, and Parisian regions, in the same spirit of warm welcome and openness.

The Fraternity defines itself as a “provisional instrument” at the service of local bishops in the quest of the “one thing needful.” We are “baptized into one body,” that of Christ, “who is all, and in all” (1 Cor 12:13, Col. 3:11). In this ecclesial spirit, the Fraternity works humbly toward the elaboration of a unified, canonical organization.

To accomplish its mission in the transmission of Orthodox theology and liturgy, the Orthodox Fraternity of Western Europe serves several practical functions. It offers training in liturgical music and chant, French translations of the Liturgy and of the services of Holy Week and the liturgical calendar, and catechetical resources for children. The Fraternity has also made available materials for discussion and reflection. Of particular historical importance is the monthly review *Service Orthodoxe de Presse et d'Information* (Orthodox Press and Information Service), the SOP, which existed from 1975 to 2011. Its goal was to give information on the life of the Orthodox Church in France and in the world and to offer reflections on current events. A quarterly theological review, *Contacts*, was founded in 1949 and is published to this day.

Most importantly, since 1971, the Fraternity has organized the Orthodox Congress of Western Europe, which periodically brings together 400–800 people of all origins. Congresses are held every three years in various regions of France and Belgium. They

Orthodox Congress of Western Europe, 2018, Sainte-Tulle, France. Photo by Alexandra de Moffarts.

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center around liturgical celebrations, in particular the Eucharist, as well as talks given by clergy and laypeople, theologians, and professionals such as doctors, economists, and politicians. They also include pedagogical workshops and group reflections. The content of these conferences is published in *Contacts*, which has become one of the important pillars of contemporary Orthodox thought in France.

These meetings are intense and spiritually rich occasions. Past conference themes have included “Resurrection and the Man of Today,” “Transfiguring Life,” “Creation Placed Between Our Hands,” “Christianity is Only at Its Beginning,” “Be Fully in the World, But Not of the World”, and finally—the theme of the most recent congress, held in November 2018—“And You Shall Be My Witnesses.” The Congress should not be conceived as a mere program of lectures that one attends passively, or with questions posed quickly to speakers. There are also roundtables, workshops, and various informal group gatherings organized around themes. Each and every person arrives at the congress with his or her own questions. Participants can question, bring their reflections to the table, converse, and

reflect on all that makes up their daily lives.

For many, these meetings are an opportunity to break from daily life, from a small local community that may be a little isolated, and to realize the universality and catholicity of the Church. Participants see that people speak different languages, pray in different languages, have differing national origins—and yet still find themselves all united around the same eucharistic chalice. There is exchange, deepening of faith, and reflection on how we can incarnate faith privately and publicly in the largely secular society in which we live today.

It is very important to highlight the uniquely ecclesial spirit of the Congress, which assembles around the bishops who preside over it. “The Church is in the bishop, and the bishop in the Church,” said Saint Ignatius of Antioch. The bishops are present, immersed in the people of God. It is an opportunity for participants to live beside them for three days, in all simplicity, and to engage with them. All of this culminates, naturally, at the eucharistic liturgy: “The Church makes up the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes up the Church.”



Orthodox Congress
of Western Europe,
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France. Photo by Al-
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At the present time, we are confronted by deep institutional crisis. In particular, there is great tension between the patriarchs of Moscow and Constantinople. Holy Communion itself has been cut off between the patriarchates. We are directly impacted by these decisions on our Western European soil, where members of the same family cannot always commune at the same chalice. On top of this, in late November 2018, the Patriarch of Constantinople decided to abolish the status of the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox Churches in Western Europe as an exarchate. This decision was taken in the most unilateral and brutal manner possible, without any consultation with Archbishop Jean of Charioupolis.

Where is Christ in this unilateral decision? The Orthodox people, gathered from different national origins, rooted in diverse regions of Western Europe for a hundred years now, have been sacrificed on the altar of institutional

politics. What a contrast to the way in which this diaspora grew up in a spirit of conciliarity, in liberty of speech and exchange, where laypeople could express themselves freely and be heard, where the Church tried to live out its vocation as a true community.

It is in this context that the Fraternity lives out its mission with tragic acuity. It remains a place of mutual encounter around Christ. It remains a place where, whoever we are, whatever our origins, we assemble around Christ and in Christ. In the multitude of our origins—representative of the diversity of humanity—we find ourselves in prayer around Christ, sharing in the Eucharist that is for the community assembled around their pastors. This diversity must be used in service of our unity. We must affirm this truth with strength. The fraternity is only a simple instrument, but is of particular importance at this time, as it works for this essential, local Orthodox Christianity. ☩



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