

# “Christ and His Church”: Reenvisioning Georges Florovsky’s Ecclesiology

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Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) was the founder of a theological program that has become the main paradigm for Orthodox theology in our era, the so-called Neopatristic Synthesis.<sup>1</sup> Begun in the early 1920s, his work sought to renew Orthodox theology on the basis of a constructive and interpretive return to the tradition of the church fathers, and to liberate theological method from certain Western scholastic influences. His mission, shared by a considerable number of eminent Orthodox theologians, was not explicitly concerned with the articulation of a comprehensive ecclesiology. In terms of doctrine, however, Florovsky was deeply engaged in a constant dialogue with eminent representatives of the major Christian traditions on the nature of the Church.

In this brief text, through examination of Florovsky’s major ecclesiological studies, I focus on his account of the question “who is the Church?” particularly from the point of view of theological methodology, while at the same time attempting to highlight possible theological and practical shortcomings. In the Bible and in the patristic era, no clear conceptual definition of the Church’s identity can be found, but only images such as the body of Christ and the people of God. The debate about who or what the Church is—in other words, the relation between Christ and the Church—remains a fer-

vent one, due to its various theological and pastoral implications (in relation to primacy and synodality, mission, the relation between Church and world, and so forth). It seems, then, that one cannot make any further step towards Christian unity or even Orthodox unity unless one successfully addresses the question of the Church’s identity.

## Georges Florovsky and the Importance of Theological Method

*The Body of the Living Christ*, authored in the context of the World Council of Churches ecumenical dialogue of 1948, derives from the mature period of Florovsky’s theological career. It is the main text in which he explores the methodological foundations of a Christian way of doing theology in general and ecclesiology in particular. Florovsky attempts to define the parameters of an ecclesial approach to the foundational events of Christian faith, rather than to describe or formulate an ecclesiology per se. The lack of an ad hoc study of ecclesiology in the patristic era did not pose any serious problem for him. This is because the fathers considered that “the Church is a reality that one sees rather than an object one analyzes and studies.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, their primary mode of doing theology was the interpretation of biblical events about the almighty works of God and the meaning of history from the point of view of the Church. In this way, the fathers

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Florovsky, *The Body of the Living Christ: An Orthodox Interpretation of the Church*, trans. Robert Arida (Boston: The Wheel Library, 2018), 22–3.

avoided reflecting on the Church as a predetermined, independently existing, or self-defined reality.

Following this line of thought, Florovsky endeavors to articulate what one might call the methodological first principles of his theological vision, attempting to create a kind of prolegomenon to formulating a theological system. In doing so, he clearly recognizes the difficulty of such an endeavor, and observes that even during his time, “the doctrine of the Church does not seem to be adequately incorporated into the integral structure of a ‘Catholic’ theology.”<sup>3</sup> What is lacking then is not a mere discussion about the Church per se (as an institution with certain structures, in other words as an object of inquiry), but a consideration of the divine economy in its entirety (from the creation of the world to the second coming of Christ) as the necessary precondition or context for any theological understanding of the Church’s identity.

This makes evident the difficulties of the angle at which Florovsky approaches ecclesiology. As he clearly puts it: “the first problem with which the contemporary theologian of the Church should wrestle is the question of *perspective*; what is the right place of the ‘treatise’ on the Church in the total fabric of a balanced and Orthodox system of theology?” Florovsky thus provides the reader with a study on the ecclesial character of theology, or, in other words, the ecclesial precondition of all teaching and preaching: “Theology is practiced and cultivated in the Church.”<sup>4</sup>

### **“Christ and His Church”: Towards an Asymmetrical Ecclesiology**

In another ecclesiological study, which appeared some years later under the title “Christ and His Church,” Florovsky

provides a clearer understanding of the topic under discussion. Speaking about the relevance of *perspective*, he contends that “it is impossible to speak of the Church before enough has been said of Christ Himself.”<sup>5</sup> As the starting point and framework for his theological view, Florovsky takes the person and the work of Jesus Christ in his *paschal mystery* as the horizon of the biblical history of salvation. Grounded firmly in the biblical tradition (Saint Paul), the patristic tradition (Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Augustine), and the liturgical tradition (Saint Nicholas Cabasilas), Florovsky bases his ecclesial view on the Pauline image of the Church as the body of Christ. It is the mystery of Christ as a whole, “*totus Christus, caput et corpus*” that constitutes the unique starting point for approaching the Church and the divine economy in general (a clearly Christocentric view).<sup>6</sup> For Florovsky, what is at stake in the context of the ecumenical movement is the very “*pattern* of the ecclesiological construction.” As he aptly puts it: “Should we start just with the fact (or ‘phenomenon’) of the Church’s being a ‘community’ . . . or should we rather start with Christ?”<sup>7</sup> The question that lies in the background is about the identity of Christ himself (especially his “human nature”) and his relation to the Church as his Body—in other words, about the *personal* and the *ecclesial* history of Christ.

By virtue of a careful ecclesial interpretation of the Definition of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)—according to which Jesus is “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in two natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably”—Florovsky argues that the Church owes its existence, derives its hypostasis, from the incarnation and the whole mystery of the God-man. The Church is

<sup>3</sup> “Christ and His Church: Suggestions and Comments,” in *1054–1954: L’Église et les églises: Neuf siècles de douloureuse séparation entre l’Orient et l’Occident*, vol. 2 (Chevetogne, France: Editions de Chevetogne, 1955), 161–2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Also see *The Body*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> “Christ and His Church,” 170.

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 28, in *Patrologia Latina* [hereafter *PL*] 35.1622. Cf. *The Body*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> “Christ and His Church,” 165.

the “fruit” and the “summary” of “Christ’s redeeming work,” exemplified predominantly in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.<sup>8</sup> Similar to his “asymmetrical Christology,” Florovsky also articulates an *asymmetrical ecclesiology*, where Christ and his Church, while not separated or divided, at the same time cannot be identical. Christ himself as the incarnated Word of God possesses a priority over the Church, which has been considered as enhypostasized in him. This means that the Church should not be understood as a self-sufficient entity or object (a sort of an Aristotelian substance or essence). It should only be understood through the lens of Christ’s hypostasis and accordingly as a continuous extension of his historical human nature to the whole world.

“The theology of the Church is only a chapter, and an essential chapter, of Christology.”<sup>9</sup> In Florovsky’s perspective, Christology should have priority over ecclesiology, without the two being divided or confused. This distinction between Christ and his Church is of crucial importance. The danger is that under certain conditions (when, for instance, the Church threatens the personal otherness of Christ by substituting his presence with ecclesiastical or worldly authorities or institutions: caesaropapism and *vice versa*), “Jesus’s history”—his personal human history, as well as the fundamental events of the paschal mystery for the salvation of the whole creation—may be put in brackets. In such cases, the foundational axis and starting point of doing Christian theology, the *mysterium Christi*, is put in jeopardy—for example, when a “theology of repetition” uses the patristic corpus as proof-texts, rather than as witness to his message, or when church tradition gains priority over apostolic tradition.

## The Spirit and Creation: Two Omissions in Florovsky’s Ecclesiology and Other Possible Distortions

Florovsky did not manage to develop a full ecclesiological account, in part because of his strong commitment to improving the hitherto sketchy character of patristic theology and perhaps also because of the ongoing ecclesiological discussions of his ecumenical era, which required him to address various concrete challenges. Because his ecclesiology was not fully developed, certain omissions or pitfalls can be identified. In the remainder of this essay, I intend to focus on two major aspects that should be taken into account in any contemporary discussion of the identity of the Church.

1. First, the role of the Holy Spirit in the constitution of the Church has occupied a central place in ecumenical discussions, especially since the Second Vatican Council. Florovsky became aware of this discussion early on, thanks to his colleague Vladimir Lossky (1903–58), who, in his much celebrated *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, wrote of two distinct economies, that of the Son and that of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Lossky, who was attempting to overcome the problem of authoritarianism that he diagnosed in his ecumenical encounters with the Roman Catholics in particular, ascribed the “organic,” natural, and necessary aspect of the Church to Christ and the free, “personal” aspect to the Holy Spirit. In so doing, he improperly addressed the relationship of Son and Spirit, attributing to the latter a primary and almost independent role in ecclesiology. Florovsky, in his preliminary engagement with the role of the Spirit in ecclesiology, criticized this inadequacy in Lossky’s Christological presuppositions. His concern was that Lossky’s Christology endangered Christ’s presence in the Church by adopting, or rather selecting,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Body*, 26.  
“Christ and His Church,” 167.

<sup>9</sup> *The Body*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1944; Crestwood: SVS Press, 1976).

one set of biblical images of the Spirit as the primary characteristic of the Son (John 16:13–14). Florovsky’s bold reaction against this imbalanced overemphasis on the alleged personalizing attitude of the Holy Spirit in the doctrine of the Church can be explained as a reaction against a generalised tendency of his time to transform ecclesiology into a “charismatic sociology.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite his initially correct reaction, Florovsky himself did not succeed in giving a satisfactory account of the Spirit’s role with regards to the Church’s identity. He argues that “once and forever, in a majestic and ineffable mystery, the Spirit-Paraclete entered the world, where it had not yet been present as it would be from then on.” He later states that “the Spirit is not in the whole world, for there is still an impermeable boundary between the sacred and the profane.”<sup>12</sup> The different wording highlights an ambivalent, if not problematic, understanding of the role of the Spirit. More importantly, by continuing to consider the role of the Spirit only as secondary to Christ, as a sort of satellite which simply helps or supports his historical work, and, one can say, by entrapping the Paraclete within history, Florovsky appears to jeopardize the eschatological and existential character of the Church. He thereby seems to apotheosize a certain historical institution (the Orthodox Church), a certain historical period (Byzantine), or a certain authority (the *consensus Patrum*).<sup>13</sup> Such a view, however, should be read in parallel with his warning on the “historical antinomies,” the dialectical relationship between Church and world: the Church—although it exists in this world—is not of this world, because it draws its identity from the eschaton: “The failure of all the utopian hopes cannot obscure the Christian message and hope. The King *has come*,

the Lord Jesus, and his Kingdom *is coming*.”<sup>14</sup>

2. Second, this ambivalent understanding of the Spirit’s role relates also to Florovsky’s clearly anthropocentric idea of ecclesiology. In his discussion about the “catholicity” of the Church, he stresses the “corporate” and mainly communal perspective of Christian life, since “in Christ and in the communion of the Holy Spirit . . . [the Church is a] spiritual harmony, a symphony of persons.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to the importance ascribed especially to the Eucharist, as the locus par excellence where “the Jesus of history is above all recognized as Christ and Lord *in fractione panis* [in the breaking of bread],” one can point to the lack of a “cosmic” vision of the Church.<sup>16</sup> The Spirit acts predominantly within the Church, being thus understood as a community without relationship to the entire cosmos. This is at odds with the more inclusive perspectives articulated by his Russian interlocutor, Sergius Bulgakov, and one of his most noted pupils, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, about the salvation of the whole creation—an aspect that relates to the environmental concerns of today’s theology and Christian witness.<sup>17</sup>

Besides this problematic ambivalence concerning the role of the Holy Spirit within the historical church in relation to cosmic history at large, Florovsky’s asymmetrical ecclesiology raises other open questions, which surpass the scope of this essay but are worth noting for the sake of continuing the conversation. These include:

- With regard to theological methodology, the dialectic between an *ecclesial* view of truth and reality and a view of the Church as an object of

<sup>11</sup> “Christ and His Church,” 164–8.

<sup>12</sup> *The Body*, 35 and 47. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *The Body*, 47: “The Spirit descended upon the Church where it has dwelt ever since.” Cf. Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri De Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> *The Body*, 87. Compare with: “The Kingdom had come, for the Spirit itself is the Kingdom.” *The Body*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> “Christ and His Church,” 161. *The Body*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> *The Body*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: “Behold, I Make All Things New”* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), ch. 9. John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

inquiry (a kind of “ecclesiolatry”, implied in certain triumphalist understandings of the Church’s role and presence within the present world, thus putting aside the sacramental presence of Christ himself);

- The relationship between Church and world as a dialectic or a compromise;
- The risk of ontologizing or existentializing the Church and thus prioritizing the hierarchical aspect of the Church over and against the charismatic, the communal against the individual, or vice versa;
- The dialectic of a close tie of the Church with the world, to the extent of an almost full identification between the two, and a lessening or even negation of the intrinsic value of the historical community and history in general in favor of an ideal Church community which already and fully resides in the kingdom of God (“realized eschatology”), leading thus to an undervaluation of any political or missionary dimension of the Church;
- An obscuring of the critical dynamism of eschatology that liberates the Church from the temptation of being identified with totalitarian and authoritarian aspects of the world or, conversely, an over-eschatological emphasis which understands the Church as beyond the world and history, already at the state of the kingdom.

## In Place of a Conclusion

Following the apostolic model of doing theology, it is clear that from a Christian point of view, the head, Jesus Christ, should govern the body, for it is Christ who became human in order to save humanity and creation as a whole. A Church that, in its relations with the world, follows the incarnational and cross-centered model of its head suggests different political or missionary implications from a hierarchically petrified Church that imposes its presence on the surrounding world, sometimes in an authoritarian way.

Florovsky’s understanding seems to be neither one nor the other. He takes a wider view that includes all the diverse phases of the divine plan, adopting as his starting point the “mystery of Christ,” to the extent that the Church is closely dependent upon it, unable to be self-defined. His view is dominated by the re-discovery of the Christocentric ground of ecclesiology by virtue of an emphasis on the Pauline biblical image of the body of Christ, often neglected in his time.

With his strong emphasis on the structural priority of Christology over ecclesiology, Florovsky attempted to address the concerns and challenges of his ecumenical era. At the same time, however, his undervaluation of the role of the Spirit could lead to an overly restrictive understanding of the identity of the Church, with authoritarian and petrified views of its structures creating a pronounced tension with the surrounding democratic context that prevails in our own era. ✱

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