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# The Ethos of the Church's Sacraments in Family Pastoral Care

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## Abstract

The Church is the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with the believers, with the Christian families in which the Mystery of God itself is reflected. This fact shows that in the Most Holy Trinity, Trinitarian love is reflected and, thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit, all members of the Church form One body and One soul in Jesus Christ. When families participate in the Holy Eucharist, the entire liturgical community experiences the mystery of communion with the Most Holy Trinity and with one's fellow human beings. Therefore, in order to promote the many gifts, blessings, and vocations of the Christian family, a Pastoral Care attentive to the Sacrament of the Church-communion is important, because the family that lives in a dynamic, co-responsible, caring ecclesial community certainly learns more easily to discern the saving call of Christ. The concern and responsibility of vocations in family life requires a constant pedagogy of grace or an education of the voice of God, and the awareness of the voice of God among family members can only take place in a climate of profound communion with the God of communion and love. And this is achieved above all in the atmosphere of invocation of prayer.

## Keywords

Morality, spirituality, Gospel, pastoral, Mysteries of the Church, Priesthood-Archpriesthood, family life.

## I. The Sacrament of Marriage and the Ethos of Family Pastoral Care

### I.1. The anthropological root of the family ethos

These themes are significant and clearly highlight the determination to create a perspective image on the situation of the Orthodox family, but also of the Christian family in the world, which is now going through difficult times. However, the family also has rich possibilities because it also has rich gifts, being an institution deeply rooted in human nature. Saint Gregory of Nyssa tells us that “Our Creator gave us love as an expression of our human nature”<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the Christian family experiences the energies of life and the treasures of goodness that the Holy Spirit pours out upon it, and which it will never lack in fulfilling its sacred mission to transmit life and defend family love throughout the generations. The Most Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, decide from pre-eternity that the joy of the communion of intratrinitarian existence enjoyed by the Persons of Life and the Trinitarian Godhead be shared with other rational beings, created-given even if in an infinitely more imperfect nature<sup>2</sup>. The Holy Spirit is and will always be the craftsman of family life to which we are called to always open ourselves. Orthodox Christian spirituality is understood through its relationship with the Holy Spirit, rather than as a vague spiritual experience or an elusive pietism<sup>3</sup>. Thus, “grace, faith, and trust are for friends and family children”<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, today the family’s own identity is subject to dehumanizing trends, mentalities, and threats. The loss of the ontological “human” dimension in family life leads to relativization, to questioning the anthropological<sup>5</sup> basis and root of the family as a communion of persons. Then, almost everywhere in the world, false alternatives appear that do

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<sup>1</sup> St. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Creation of Man*, C. 5, PG 44, 137C.

<sup>2</sup> See Rev. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ioan C. TEȘU, *The World, Prayer and Asceticism in the Theology of Father Stăniloae*, Trinitas, Iași, 2003, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Christos YANNARAS, *The Freedom of Morality*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1984, pp. 119-136; Andreas ANDREPOULOS, “A Modern Orthodox Approach to Spirituality”, in: *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 11 (2011), pp. 10–23.

<sup>4</sup> St. NICOLAS CABASILA, *About life in Christ*, Ed. Pournara, Thessaloniki, 2004, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT, *On Human Being, A Spiritual Anthropology*, New City Press, New York, 2000, pp. 69-90.

not recognize the family as a gift and a precious and necessary good for the social community, for the social fabric. In this way, through the lack of responsibility and the erosion of everyone's commitment to the family, there is the risk of paying, unfortunately, a very high social price, from which future generations will suffer in particular, victims of a harmful and confused mentality, as well as of lifestyles unworthy of human beings. One area of study in Orthodox theology that is still in an upward dynamic is anthropology<sup>6</sup>. Theologians have not shied away from using all available scientific or humanistic disciplines to articulate an orthodox perspective on the anthropological dilemmas of postmodernity. The questions raised by emerging globalization, the environmental crisis<sup>7</sup>, and bioethical dilemmas have fueled interest in revealing an orthodox perspective on anthropology<sup>8</sup>.

## **I.2. Taking responsibility**

In today's global world, the institution of the family suffers from a worrying fragility, which becomes greater when there is no preparation-capacity to assume one's own responsibilities within the family, through an attitude of full mutual dedication, sincerity, peace and true love. God "is called love, peace, and through these names He urges us to transform ourselves according to these virtues that characterize Him"<sup>9</sup>. At the same

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<sup>6</sup> Nonna Verna HARRISON, "The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God", in: Mary B. CUNNINGHAM, Elizabeth THEOKRITOFF (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 78-92; Bogdan LUBARDIC, "Orthodox Theology of Personhood: A Critical Overview (Part 1)", in: *The Expository Times* 122 (2011), pp. 521-530; Bogdan LUBARDIC, "Orthodox Theology of Personhood: A Critical Overview (Part 2)", in: *The Expository Times* 122 (2011), pp. 573-581; Emmanuel CLAPSIS, "The Challenge of a Global World", in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: An Ecumenical Conversation*, WCC Publications, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004, pp. 47-66.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley S. HARAKAS, *Living the Faith, The Praxis of Eastern Orthodox Ethics*, Light & Life Publishing, Minneapolis, MN, 1992, pp. 215-221; Norman WIRZBA, "A Priestly Approach to Environmental Theology: Learning to Receive and Give Again the Gifts of Creation", in: *Dialog* 50 (2011), pp. 354-362.

<sup>8</sup> Kallistos WARE, "Orthodox Theology Today: Trends and Tasks", in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12 (2012), pp. 105-121; Nonna Verna HARRISON, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapid, MI, 2010, pp. 1-8, 185-194.

<sup>9</sup> St. GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN, *Oratio* 6, 12, PG 35, 737 C; Cf. *Oratio* 11, 7, PG 35, 841 C.

time, we must recognize that many Christian families in Europe and other continents offer a comforting ecclesial and social witness: they live this mutual gift in conjugal and family love in a wonderful way, assuming and overcoming difficulties and adversities. It is precisely from this total dedication that the couple's happiness springs, when it remains faithful to conjugal love, when it is animated by the spirit of forgiveness and opens itself with trust to the gift of life.

### **I.3. Internal family cohesion**

In today's societies around the world, trends emerge that not only do not contribute to the defense and support of the family as a fundamental human institution, but, on the contrary, are trends that oppose the family, making its internal cohesion much more fragile. They spread mentalities favorable to divorce, contraception, and abortion, in fact denying the authentic feeling of love and ultimately attacking human life, not recognizing the full right to life of the human being. The overt and subtle attacks against the family and human life are, of course, numerous, but thanks to the gift of God there are many families who remain faithful to their human and Christian vocation, despite the difficulties.

These families are reacting to the attacks they are subjected to from a certain contemporary hedonistic and materialistic culture. Thus, these families become responsible and organizationally involved to provide a renewing, hopeful response together. Family pastoral care is a priority duty today and it can be seen that it is showing signs of recovery and awakening in defense of the family. I am referring here to some legislative interventions, as well as to ecclesial and public occasions, suitable to slow down the advance of the demographic winter, felt especially in Europe, but also on other continents. The number of movements and associations in favor of the family and life is increasing, a new social consciousness is being consolidated and formed. Yes, the resources of the family are many! Yes, the resources of the family's pastoral care are rich.

Any member of the community clearly thrives due to the generosity and kindness of others. Thus, someone is born into a family whose members provide all the material and emotional needs so that a healthy and

creative citizen can grow and educate<sup>10</sup>. Without the generosity of a family, it might not have existed. Moreover, each member of this family depended while growing up and continues to depend at all times on their interaction with the environment to meet their essential needs in life. Without these collaborative and interdependent relationships, any community would not thrive. Within such an ethos, a good recipient of social generosity is a generous benefactor to others, who embraces gratitude as a way of life.

#### **I.4. Culture of Life**

Political leaders and legislators of states are called to fully assume their commitments to defend the family and to foster the culture of life, to present the fundamental rights inherent in that natural, local and universal community which is the family. It is about rights expressed and lived in the conscience of the human being and in the common values of all humanity, which spring from that law which is inscribed by the Creator in the heart of every human being, so that Christian families throughout the world may increasingly be “Domestic Churches” and holy sanctuaries of life. One of the distinctive traits acquired by Basil the Great is the strong awareness of the Christian faith as a sacrifice not only of human freedom<sup>11</sup>, but also of human life, whenever this is intrinsically necessary<sup>12</sup>.

The unifying principle of all people, in a life centered on holiness, is the person of Christ, regardless of the prevailing religious diversity. The creation of the universe unites all in their innate attraction to God, the only giver of life. In the person of Christ, moreover, the created world is drawn towards unity, a unity that preserves the uniqueness of each

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<sup>10</sup> N. V. Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image...*, pp. 169-184; Leon R. KASS, *Liberty and the Defense of Dignity, The Challenge for Bioethics*, Encounter Books, 2002, pp. 231-256; Eric J. CASSELL, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 158-175.

<sup>11</sup> Man is free to decide on his perfection, using well the power of discernment with which he was endowed by God. Many times our behavior is hesitant due to the fact that “our nature has an equal tendency to lean towards both sides and often moves away from good as if in a yoke, so now because of the passions of the soul it falls, now again through the word it rises to what is better”: St. BASIL THE GREAT, *On Isaiah*, chap. 7, 202, PG 30, 465 b.

<sup>12</sup> See St. BASIL THE GREAT, *On the Holy Spirit* 75; *Ethics* 8:1: 712 C-D; 70.19; 832B.

person but spiritually transforms them into a status according to Christ<sup>13</sup>. While an Orthodox phronema recognizes the eschatological potential of every human being, it takes into account the actuality of the human (and universal) condition marked by alienation, suffering, and death. Therefore, an Orthodox catechesis, pastoral care, morality and bioethics should not limit their mission to those who belong to the Orthodox Church, but should be open to the complex anthropological reality of a globalized world<sup>14</sup>. The mission of the Church is “to create unity where there is division, to bring reconciliation to life where there is alienation, to heal and restore a sick, lifeless human nature, and to free persons from the spiritual and physical violence of evil”<sup>15</sup>.

### I.5. Pastoral Activities

The impetus-dynamism of pastoral activity for the family must be enlivened and encouraged, in a period of rapid secularization, which also affects the internal life of Christian communities. Theologian Elizabeth Behr-Sigel spoke at length about the need to learn to “affirm the truth in love”<sup>16</sup> in the many families of Orthodoxy. Opening up to the presence of God and seeking the face of the living God, the guarantor of our freedom and truth, constitutes a premise for reaching a new humanity, a new family. Today in the world there is a special need for the proclamation and testimony of the One God, Who is love and, consequently, the One Light and the One Truth which, ultimately, illuminates the darkness of the world and gives us the power of His grace to live and to do.

In difficult moments and situations, the Christian family should remember the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which the Apostle

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<sup>13</sup> Nonna Verna HARRISON, “Gregory of Nyssa on Human Unity and Diversity”, in: *Studia Patristica, Orientalia*, Vol 41, Clement, Origen, Athanasius; the Cappadocians; Chrysostom, Peeters Publications, Leuven, 2006, pp. 333–44.

<sup>14</sup> Boris BOBRINSKOY, “God in Trinity”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 49–62.

<sup>15</sup> Vigen GUROIAN, “Seeing Worship as Ethics, An Orthodox Perspective”, in: *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 13, (1985), p. 347; Peter BOUTENEFF, “Christ and Salvation”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 93–106.

<sup>16</sup> Apud Michael PLEKON, *Discerning the Signs of the Times, The Vision of Elizabeth Behr-Sigel*, SVS Press, New York, 2001, pp. 16-17.

Paul urges us to run with perseverance the fight that lies before us, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of faith, Who, for the joy set before Him, endured the Cross, despising its shame... “lest you become discouraged and give out in your souls” (12,1-3). What manifests itself as vulnerability in submission to death on the Cross becomes a way to overcome human mortality through God’s philanthropy. The true love of Christ overcomes death<sup>17</sup>. The pastoral care of the family is called to proclaim that the Lord Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16,16), the One who has “the words of eternal life” (cf. John 6,68), the One who never ceases to give continuous testimony about our hope (cf. 1 Peter 3,15).

Urged by our ecclesial-pastoral commitment and by the spirit of full communion in Christ in the proclamation and service of the Gospel, it is necessary to form and guide the moral conscience of our believers in various aspects of the very reality they face, which sometimes disrupts ecclesial life and the faith of the people, the faith of the simple. The Eucharist represents the central theme of our pastoral plan, rural or urban, with the aim of revitalizing Christian life from its very heart, because by entering into the Eucharistic experience we encounter the love of the Most Holy Trinity, the God of love. Certainly in the Eucharist the energy and essential work of the Spirit of true transformation and renewal of the family, of the community, is fulfilled. From the Liturgy, John Bekos derives two principles that he considers essential to Orthodox morality and bioethics<sup>18</sup>, which are terms that highlight the role of humanity in the divine redemptive work and ministry. He argues that memory and justice play a central role in achieving this goal. Through memory, believers are not invited narrowly to remember Christ performing many miracles; rather, they are invited to remember His suffering and vulnerability on the Cross. He argues that remembering Christ’s suffering is more important

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew LOUTH, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2013, pp. 50-65; P. BOUTENEFF, “Christ and Salvation” pp. 93–106; O. CLÉMENT, *On Human Being*, pp. 43-58;

<sup>18</sup> John BEKOS, “Memory and Justice in the Divine Liturgy: Christian Bioethics in Late Modernity”, in: *Christian Bioethics* 19 (2013), pp. 100–113.

than remembering His miracles, especially because miracles would not heal human vulnerability.

## II. The Ethos of the Priesthood as Ontological Belonging to God

### II.1. Priestly Identity

The theme of priestly identity is decisive for the exercise of the sacramental priesthood, now and in the future. The priesthood of Christ is embodied in His universal mission to restore communion between God and all creation. Through His Incarnation, Christ acquires a created body and unites divinity and humanity in His person. Thus, Christ provides a bridge to bring the created world back into communion with God. Christ is, unequivocally, the One who offers and Who is offered in the Liturgy for the salvation of the world (e.g., the Prayer of the Cherubim Hymn in the Orthodox Liturgy)<sup>19</sup>. In other words, through the Incarnation, Christ revives the mission originally assigned to humanity of being the microcosm that bridges the existential chasm between the Creator and the created world, as understood in the work of Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662), who emphasizes the unity of all created reality in the divine-human person of Christ<sup>20</sup>.

This understanding led Saint Maximus to perceive the human being as a microcosm in whose person the created and uncreated worlds come to interact. Humans are the only species that possess the noetic-spiritual perception necessary to recognize the spiritual realities and reasons of each created reality. Saint Confessor Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), one of the leading theologians of the 20th century, developed the ideas of Saint Maximus by emphasizing that not only are humans microcosms, but also that the cosmos is “macranthropos”, man circumscribes the larger world. Saint Confessor Dumitru highlights in this concept the human responsibility towards society, the world and the cosmos<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, to have access to

<sup>19</sup> John MEYENDORFF, “Unity of the Church- Unity of Mankind”, in: *The Ecumenical Review* 24 (1972), pp. 30–46.

<sup>20</sup> P. BOUTENEFF, “Christ and Salvation”, pp. 93–106.

<sup>21</sup> Sylvie AVAKIAN, “The Mystery of Divine Love in the Apophatic Theology of Bishop

the logos of every created reality and to perceive it as embodied in God the Logos means, in a way, to have access to the eschatological realities of creation.

In a time like ours, so polycentric-multi-globalist and inclined to nuance any type of identity conception, considered by many to be contrary to freedom and democracy, it is important to keep in mind the theological and spiritual, liturgical and missionary particularity of priestly ministry in order not to succumb to the temptation to reduce it to mundane, dominant cultural categories. In a context marked by widespread secularization in action, which progressively excludes God from the public sphere, and, tendentially, from the shared social consciousness, the priest or bishop often appears as a “foreign” person to the common sense, precisely because of the fundamental aspects of his priestly or bishoply ministry. These aspects are those relating to the priest or hierarch as a man of the sacred, taken from the world to intercede in favor of the world, formed and called to this mission-service by God and not by men (cf. Hebrews 5,1). For this reason, it is important to overcome dangerous reductionisms towards the Mystery of the Priesthood of Christ, which, in past decades, using more functionalist than ontological categories, have presented the priest or bishop almost as a “social operator”, risking ignoring and betraying the Priesthood of Christ itself.

In this framework, an increasingly urgent hermeneutic of continuity and of the Spirit is revealed in order to adequately understand the texts of the Church and the Tradition of the Church. Similarly, a hermeneutic that we could define as “sacramental continuity” appears necessary, which, starting from the Lord Jesus Christ, and passing through the two thousand years of church history of confession and holiness, of culture, ethos and piety, which the Priesthood of the Church of Christ has written in the world, reaches our days. To develop a patristic mindset in essence and relevant to the current life of believers<sup>22</sup>, it is necessary for Jesus Christ to

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George Khodr”, in: *Theological Review* 33 (2012), pp. 39–68; A. LOUTH, “The Patristic Revival and Its Protagonists”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 188–202; N. V. HARRISON, “Human Person...”, pp. 78–92.

<sup>22</sup> Assaad E. KATTAN, “Hermeneutics; A Protestant Discipline for an Orthodox Context?”, in: *Theological Review: The Near East School of Theology* 23 (2002), pp. 47–57.

be the center of our spirituality and for love for Christ, living together with Christ to deeply inspire family life.

In the time in which we live, marked by openness and the preservation of ecclesial identity, it is particularly important that the call to participate in the one Priesthood of Christ in the priestly ministry flourish in the “charism of prophecy”: there is a great need for priests or bishops who speak to the world about God the Trinity and who present the world to God the Trinity. It is about people who are not subject to ephemeral cultural models/patterns, but are capable of authentically living that freedom that only the certainty of belonging and communion with God the Trinity is able to give. God prefers to let individual human beings freely seek the lost communion with Him as a way to give people a true sense of what freedom means<sup>23</sup>.

Today, the most necessary prophecy is that of faithfulness-fidelity, which, starting from Christ’s devotion to humanity, through the Church and the sacramental Priesthood, leads to living one’s own priesthood in total adhesion-dedication to Christ and the Church. In fact, the priest or hierarch no longer belongs to himself, but, through the sanctifying and working seal received, is a gift bestowed by the Most Holy Trinity. This “being of Christ” of the priest or bishop must be able to be recognized by all, through a clear testimony. Only through Christ the Lord can there be access to true knowledge<sup>24</sup>, following the trinitarian paradigm of communion<sup>25</sup>.

In his way of thinking, verbal communication, judging the facts of the world, serving and loving, relating to people, the priest or bishop must show prophetic testimony that comes from his sacramental-sanctifying belonging, from his profound being. Therefore, the priest should exercise all discernment in avoiding that dominant mentality, which tends to associate the value of the servant not with his being, but with his function, thus not recognizing the work of God, which has an impact on the profound identity of the priest’s person, configuring him with Christ or in Christ, in a

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<sup>23</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT, “Purification by Atheism”, in: A.M. ALLCHIN (ed.), *Orthodoxy and the Death of God: Essays in Contemporary Theology*, Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1971, pp. 22–39; O. CLÉMENT, *On Human Being*, pp. 25–42.

<sup>24</sup> St. BASIL THE GREAT, *Against Eunomius* 1.26: 569C. Cf. *On the Holy Spirit* 17–19.

<sup>25</sup> N. V. HARRISON, *God’s Many-Splendored Image...*, pp. 29–45.

definitive way. A prophetic missiology is needed, in the sense that it seeks to bring the good news to the whole world by redefining the misunderstood concepts of the discourse of priestly ministry. This mission is propelled by a sensitive love, open to dialogue with the other who is different from us<sup>26</sup>.

## **II.2. The ethos of ontological belonging to God**

The horizon of ontological belonging to the living God constitutes, besides this truth, the correct framework for understanding and reaffirming in our days the value of the sacramental, divine and holy priesthood of Christ, an authentic testimony-prophecy of the Kingdom in the Holy Spirit, a sign of consecration with an undivided heart to the Lord Christ and “those who are the Lord’s” (1 Corinthians 7,32), an expression of self-giving to God the Father, to the community and to other fellow beings. Therefore, the priest’s vocation is a very high one, a vocation that remains a great mystery even for us, those who have received it as a gift. Our limitations and weaknesses must induce us to live and preserve with profound faith this precious gift, with/through which Christ assumed us and made us like Him, making us sharers in His soteriological mission. In fact, the understanding of the Mystery of the Priesthood is linked to living faith and requires, in an increasingly convincing way, a perfect continuity between theological-spiritual formation in institutes (and seminaries) and ongoing formation after ordination.

The prophetic life through which we will serve God, society and the world, proclaiming the Word of the Gospel and celebrating the Mysteries of the Church, will favor the coming of the already present kingdom and the growth in faith of believers. The faithful of our time ask us only one thing: to be priest-bishops to the end and nothing else. The lay faithful will find in so many other people what they need from a human, social, cultural, professional point of view, but only in the priest will they be able to find the word of God, which must always be on his lips. The merciful love of God the Father, given and shared out of His goodness and gratuitousness

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher DURASINGH, “Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World”, in: E. CLAPSIS (ed.), *Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: An Ecumenical Conversation*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, WCC Publications, 2004, pp. 207-218.

in the Sacrament of Penance. The Bread-Lamb of the new life, “true food given to men”, in the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. Our daily gratitude to Christ for the great gift of the vocation of the priesthood, living with devotion, joy and complete fidelity the Priesthood of Christ.

### III. The ethos of the family is based on the liturgical-sacramental identity

#### III.1. The mission is nourished by prayer

In parish life, we turn with the unceasing loving gaze of our reason, mind, and heart towards Christ, the Only Lord and Only Savior of the human being and of the entire world. To remember Christ means to remember that Divine Face of the Father that every man, consciously or not, seeks as the only adequate answer to his own thirst and his own insatiable longing for being and happiness. He preserves his longing for the One who eternally calls him to being and existence in God<sup>27</sup>. This Face of the Son and the Word, if we met Him and, on that day, at that moment, His love touched our heart so much that it was impossible for us not to ask Him constantly to stay in the presence of Christ: “In the morning you will hear my voice; in the morning I will stand before You and wait for me” (Psalm 5,3).

The liturgy always leads us to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, the origin and profound reality of this communion, which is the Church: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior. “No one could have seen His glory if he

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<sup>27</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa praises man, saying that he was honored by God through creation and placed above every creature: “The heavens were not made in the image of God, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor the beauty of the stars, nor any other of the things that appear in creation. Only you (human soul) were made the image of nature that surpasses all mind, the likeness of incorruptible beauty, the seal of true divinity, the receptacle of the happy life, the icon of the true light, which by beholding you become what He is, because through the reflected ray that comes from your purity you resemble the One who shines within you. Nothing else in existence is so great as to be compared to your greatness”.: *Homily at the Song of Songs 2* PG 44,805D. We also see that man, although degraded by sin, is called to regain his original greatness: only if God is present in man’s life does man reach this true splendor.

had not first been healed by the humility of the body. You were blinded by dust and with dust you were healed: the body had blinded you, the body heals you”<sup>28</sup>.

Only by looking again at the perfect and fascinating humanity of Jesus Christ, alive and working here and now, who revealed Himself to us and who here and now bends over each one again with that unique love of total predilection that is His own, is it possible to let Christ illuminate and fill our humanity with grace, being certain of the hope found in Christ, being certain of the merciful love of Christ that embraces our limits, teaching us to forgive what we were not even able to notice in ourselves.

It is good, in parish life, to remember the priority of prayer over action, because the dynamism of action depends on prayer. The mission and pastoral care of the Church fundamentally depend on the personal relationship of each family with the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the mission must be nourished by prayer. The time has come to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of activism and threatening secularism. Let us draw continually from the love of Christ, let us let Christ see and heal the painful wounds of our sin, so that we may marvel at the ever-new miracle of our own redeemed humanity. We are called to be our own experts of God’s merciful love in us and, only in this way, His instruments in embracing, in an ever-renewed way, wounded humanity. Christ does not save us from our humanity, Christ does not save us apart from our humanity, but through our humanity. Christ does not save us from the world, Christ does not save us outside the world, but Christ came into the world so that the world might be saved through Christ (cf. John 3,17). Finally, let us fulfill the fact of the ministerial priesthood for the highest fact of existence, which is the love of God and, at the same time, of His loving predilection, the Sacrament of the Priesthood.

In the thirst and desire for Christ, the Lord and Savior, the most authentic dimension of the priesthood is simple and continuous prayer, which is learned through the practice of personal prayer, which has always characterized the lives of the saints, a prayer that must be requested with insistence. This consciousness of communion with Christ is continually

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<sup>28</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Homily 2,16.

subject to purification, renewal, and spiritual testing. Every day, anew, we realize that even the servants who work in the name of Christ and through the grace of Christ's priesthood are not exempt from this drama: we cannot live a single moment in the presence of Christ without the sweet desire to recognize Christ, to know Christ, and to share in Christ. Let us not give in to the temptation to view the priesthood as an inevitable and non-delegated duty, already assumed, which can be fulfilled "mechanically", possibly with a human, articulated and coherent pastoral program. The priesthood is the vocation in Christ, the path in Christ, the way through which Christ saves us, the way through which he called us and now calls us to live in Christ.

### III.2. The Eucharist is a way of life and sanctification

The only adequate measure, in the face of the holy vocation of the priesthood or the ministry of the bishop, is totality. This total giving, with the awareness of sinfulness, can only take place as a renewed and inspired decision which, then, Christ fulfills day by day. The very gift of the priesthood-sacred hierarchy must be received and lived in this dimension of fullness and complete likeness to Christ. Any other position, with respect to the reality of the relationship with Christ, risks becoming ideological. The Eucharist is essential for the mission of the Orthodox Church in the world. It is the manifestation of the pneumatological dimension (related to the Holy Spirit) that continues and is not separated from the Christological-soteriological mission. The work of salvation in Christ and the actualization of the work of salvation of the Holy Spirit are not separated, they are one and the same salvation of the philanthropy of God the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Church's ecclesiology (its self-perception as an institution and community of believers) is necessarily shaped within the framework of Incarnation and Trinitarian theology<sup>29</sup>. In the Eucharist, the Church becomes aware of her own identity, not as an entity in opposition to a world, but as a missionary-savior working in the world to bring all creation back to God<sup>30</sup>. It is the liturgy, the work of

<sup>29</sup> Matthew STEENBERG, "The Church", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 121–135.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley S. HARAKAS, "The Church and the Secular World", in: *Greek Orthodox*

the living, practical, and real faith of the people of God, that sustains this mission daily.

And the quantity, sometimes extraordinarily large volume, of work that contemporary conditions of sacramental ministry require us to carry out, far from discouraging us, must make us worry, with even greater attention, about the identity of priestly ministry, which has a categorically divine root. In this sense, in a spiritual logic opposed to the logic of the world, even the special conditions of priestly-hierarchical ministry must make us “raise the tone” (first of all, demand from ourselves) of our spiritual life, testifying with greater conviction and conscious work of grace our exclusive belonging to Christ, the Lord.

In the spirit of total dedication we are educated by the One who first loved us. By the One who said: “I was found by those who did not seek me. I said: *Here I am* to those who did not call on my name”. The place of totality, the place of perfection, par excellence is the Eucharist, because in the Eucharist Jesus does not give “something”, but Himself. Christ offers His Body and sheds His Blood. In this way He gives the totality-fullness of His existence, revealing the original source of God’s love. The Divine Eucharist is salvation and health of the soul when we ourselves approach the Eucharist completely clean<sup>31</sup>.

Priesthood means devotion to the continuous celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist, not only to fulfill a pastoral commitment or a demand of the community entrusted to us, but for the absolute existential need that we feel, like breathing, like the light for our life, like the only adequate motivation for a fulfilled priestly or episcopal existence. “No one eats this Body before glorifying Him, we would sin if we did not glorify Him”<sup>32</sup>. We cannot live, we cannot look at the truth about ourselves, without letting ourselves be looked at and renewed by Christ in continuous Eucharistic communion. Consequently, our participation in the Eucharist unites us simultaneously with Christ and among ourselves in one Body<sup>33</sup>. Not only

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*Theological Review* 17 (1972), pp. 167–199; George KHODR, “The Church and the World”, in: *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 13 (1969), pp. 33–51.

<sup>31</sup> Saint JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On Repentance*, Homily 6, 5, PG 49, 321.

<sup>32</sup> Blessed AUGUSTINE, *Commentaries on Psalms* 98,9.

<sup>33</sup> Saint JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On 1 Corinthians*, Homily 24, 3, PG 61, 203.

does a liturgical ecclesiology define the identity of the Orthodox Church; it also opens the door of mission, pastoral care, and ethics<sup>34</sup> to the universal divine providence to save the world and all humanity<sup>35</sup>.

Just as the missionary character is intrinsic to the very nature of the Church, in the same way the priestly pastoral mission is embedded in the sacramental-ecclesial identity, which is why missionary urgency is not a matter of simple duty, but of self-awareness. The priestly, hierarchal, sacerdotal identity is built and renewed day by day by communion with the Lord, the High Priest, the Eternal Priest. Living communion with Christ, always inspired by continuous prayer, has as an immediate consequence the need to make those around us partakers of Christ. In fact, the holiness that we ask for daily cannot be conceived according to a sterile and abstract individualistic understanding, but is, necessarily, the holiness of Christ, which is a gift given, shared and transmissible to all. To be in communion with Jesus Christ implies being and existing in Christ, being and living in His unique way of “being for all”. Christ makes His own way of being our way of “being for others”, to work for the good and salvation of the world. That is why, when the Eucharistic offerings are consecrated, the priest sings aloud: “Yours from Yours”, which includes all of humanity for whom Christ was Crucified and Risen<sup>36</sup>. And through the work of the energies of the Holy Spirit, the entire created world can be transformed-renewed to be in communion with and in Christ<sup>37</sup>.

### III.3. Christian families are the path to holiness

This “being for all”, “being for the good and salvation of the world” of Christ the Savior is realized, for us, in the *tria munera* (the essential missions or ministries of the priest or bishop, that is: to teach, to sanctify and to guide) with which we are endowed by the very nature of the priesthood-hierarchy. The essential missions-services of the priest or bishop, which

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<sup>34</sup> Perry T. HAMALIS, “Eastern Orthodox Ethics”, in: *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing, 2013, pp. 1525-1535.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth THEOKRITOFF, “Creator and Creation”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 63–77.

<sup>36</sup> M. STEENBERG, “The Church”, pp. 121–135.

<sup>37</sup> E. THEOKRITOFF, “Creator and Creation”, pp. 63–77.

constitute the totality of the ministry, are not the place of alienation or, worse yet, of a simple functionalist reductionism of the person, but the truest expression of the fact of being Christ's. They are the place of existence and real communion with Christ, which is a necessarily two-way relationship that extends the soteriological work of God into the daily lives of believers. The People of God who are entrusted to be educated, sanctified and guided is not a reality that distracts us from "private life", but is the face of Christ that we daily contemplate in the baptized, just as it is the face of the beloved for the bridegroom, and just as the Church is the bride of Christ.

The people entrusted, the Christian families for shepherding, is a path to our holiness that we cannot ignore, that is, a path in which Christ manifests the Glory of God the Father through priestly ministry. "If someone causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, [...] but those who send [...] a whole nation to ruin, what will they suffer and what punishment will they receive"<sup>38</sup> ? Faced with the awareness of such a serious mission and such a great responsibility for our life and salvation, in which devotion to Christ coincides with the fulfillment of the demands dictated by the salvation of souls, there can be no room for doubt regarding the grace received.

We can only open ourselves as much as possible to His love, so that Christ may work - love through us, because either we let Jesus Christ save the world by working through us, or we risk betraying the very nature of the priestly vocation. The measure of giving is again totality, plenitude. "Five loaves and two fish" are not much, yes, but they are everything! God's grace makes, out of all our littleness, the gift-communion that satisfies the people. This total dedication, sacrificial dedication, is shared especially by elderly or sick priests or bishops who, daily, exercise the divine-liturgical ministry, uniting themselves with the Passion of Christ and offering their own priestly existence for the true good of the Church and for the salvation of souls.

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<sup>38</sup> Saint JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On the Priesthood* VI, 1498.

Finally, the foundation of the entire priestly life from which one cannot abstract remains the Most Holy Mother of God. In many church hymns, the Virgin Mary is described as the New Eve, thus emphasizing the central role of women (in the person of Mary) in the divine providence of salvation. Without the “yes” spoken by the Virgin Mary on the day of the Annunciation, the Incarnation would not have taken place<sup>39</sup>.

Communion with the Mother of God cannot be exhausted by a pious devotional practice, but is nourished by the continuous entrustment of our entire life, of our priestly ministry in its entirety, into her maternal, spiritual arms. The Mother of God once again guides us, like the Apostle John, under the Cross of Her Son and our Lord to contemplate, together with the Mother of God, like John, the infinite love of God: “He came down here to earth as our life, true life, He took upon himself our death to abolish it with the abundance of His life”<sup>40</sup>.

God the Father chose as a condition for our salvation and for the fulfillment of our humanity, for the event of the Incarnation of His Son, to wait for that “yes” of a Virgin in the face of the Annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel. Christ decided to entrust His life to the loving freedom of the mother: By conceiving Christ, giving birth to Christ, nourishing Christ, presenting Jesus Christ to God the Father in the temple, suffering together with her Crucified Son on the Cross, the Mother of God cooperated with the grace of the Most Holy Trinity in a very special way in the saving work of God, through obedience, faith, hope and fiery love. Every priestly vocation springs from the love of God, but it also passes through the love of a mother. This is true with regard to obvious biological motherhood, but also with regard to the “birth” of any devotion to the vocation of Christ. But we cannot ignore spiritual motherhood for priestly life: entrusting ourselves with trust to the prayer of the Holy Church, to the prayer and communion of the Saints. The Church is entrusted with the protection and sanctity of the priesthood-hierarchy.

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<sup>39</sup> O. CLÉMENT, *On Human Being*, pp. 25-42.

<sup>40</sup> Blessed AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* IV, 12.

#### IV. Conclusion

The bond between the Church and the family is sacred and inviolable. The Church, like a good mother, never abandons the family, even when it is degraded, wounded and in so many ways alienated. Even when they fall into sin, or move away from the Church, the Church of Christ will always do everything to try to care for and heal the family, to invite the family to conversion, and to reconcile the family with Christ, the Lord. It has been believed for some time that Orthodox theological reflection should be self-critical and less defensive in its encounter with the world outside the Church<sup>41</sup>. An example of such an encounter is that of Saint Photius the Great. Well, if this is the mission, it becomes clear how much prayer the Church needs to be able, at all times, to fulfill such a mission! A prayer full of love for family and for the gift of life. A prayer that knows how to rejoice with those who rejoice and to suffer with those who suffer. According to the explicit command of Christ, we must implore the gift of the priesthood vocation upon us, praying tirelessly and together with all the members of the Church to God, the “Lord of the harvest”. The Lord’s invitation is in the plural, it is the invitation or call of the ecclesial community: “Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matthew 9, 38).

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel CIOBOTEA, “The Tasks of Orthodox Theology Today”, in: *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 33 (1989), pp. 117–126; Aristotle PAPANIKOLAOU, “Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism: The Difference That Divine-Human Communion Makes”, in: *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42 (2007), pp. 527–547; G. KHODR, “Church and the World”, pp. 33–51.