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What Is Church?

John Behr

This essay on the Church as mother is a short summary of points made in other works.[1] There are three parts to my comments. First, I will explore briefly how and why, from the earliest period, the Church is spoken of as "mother" or "Virgin Mother." I shall then, second, consider some consequences of coordinating the existence of ecclesial communities into larger geographical entities. Third, I will suggest how and why ecclesiological reflection turned to the Eucharist as its defining element and some consequences that arise from this.

Church as Mother

The scriptural background for speaking of the Church as mother has two scriptural roots. First, the proclamation of Isaiah:

> Rejoice O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail; for the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married. (Isa. 54:1)

The application of this verse in this way is already evidenced in Paul. Taking Genesis 16 and 21 allegorically, he writes:

> These women are two covenants: one is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar—now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children—while the Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother, for it is written "Rejoice, O barren one." (Gal. 4:24–26)

Liturgically speaking, this verse from Isaiah 54 is read on Holy Friday Vespers, as the culmination to the reading of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12). The passion of Christ is, as it were, the catalyst which opens the womb of the barren one, so that she now gives birth to many children, for it is into the death of Christ that Christians are baptized (Rom. 6:3–11). It is through the death of Christ, and by being conformed to it, that we are born into life.

The second scriptural background is alluded to in the description of the crucifixion in the Gospel of John. If, as I have argued elsewhere, Christ's word "It is finished" alludes back to Genesis 1, so that Christ is the first true human being, witnessed to unknowingly by Pilate ("Behold the human being," John 19:5, 30), the flowing of blood and water from the side of the crucified Christ alludes back to Genesis 2.[2] The parallel is already noted by Tertullian:

> As Adam was a figure of Christ, Adam's sleep sketched out the

[1] John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2006), 115–40; "Mother and Bride: Ecclesiology, Christology, and Anthropology," in Sotiris Mitralexis and Andrew T. J. Kaethler, *Mapping the Una Sancta: Eastern and Western Ecclesiology in the Twenty-first Century* (Winchester University Press, forthcoming).

[2] John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 194–217.

[3] Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 43.10. Trans. in vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1887), 222.

death of Christ, who was to sleep a mortal slumber, so that from the wound inflicted on his side might be figured the true mother of the living, the Church.[3]

Whereas the woman built up from the side of the sleeping Adam was called "Eve" (*zoe*, "life"), for she is "the mother of life" (Gen. 3:20), all her children in fact die. In turn, the Church is the true mother of the living, although her children are born into life through their conformity to Christ's death. Moreover, "the woman" addressed by or spoken about by Christ in the Gospel of John is the mother (John 3:3–4, 16:21), culminating in his words, "Woman, behold your son" (John 19:26). Thereafter, the female figure takes on the role of the spouse. In Genesis, before Eve is led to Adam, he is identified as the one whose task it is to work the garden (2:8); now (another) Mary thinks the risen Christ to be the gardener (John 20:15). And so begins the second part of what Peter Leithart has called the "two-part royal romance" of the Gospel and Revelation: whereas the first part presents the Bridegroom, the second describes the building up of the Bride, the Church, in those who witness to their faith with blood, looking to the marriage feast that was announced at the beginning when the time was not yet.[4]

Our entry into the Paschal mystery of Christ through our actual death and resurrection is, of course, anticipated by both baptism and the Eucharist. That this is so for baptism is indicated by the significant change of tense in the Apostle's statement: "if we *have been* united within him in a death like his, we *shall certainly be united* with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:5). The reason for this change of tense is simply the fact that we are not yet dead! And so Paul urges us to "consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11). The same point can be made regarding the Eucharist: when Christ asks, "Can you drink the cup that I am to drink?" (Matt. 20:22), this invitation to share in the cup is an invitation to share in his passion.

In this way, Ignatius of Antioch can see his own impending martyrdom as his becoming the Eucharistic Gifts: "Let me be bread for the beasts, through which I may be able to attain to God. I am God's wheat and through the beasts' teeth I shall be found to be the pure bread for Christ."[5] One can see the same point in the Martyrdom of Polycarp: when his body was finally put to the flames, those around him smelled baking bread.[6] As such, when Ignatius describes the Eucharist as being "the medicine of immortality,"[7] he is not saying that if we partake as often as possible we will not die, but rather that by sharing in the cup, in the fulness of what that means, we are already partaking of the life that comes through death and so cannot be touched by death. Baptism and Eucharist are thus sacramental anticipations of the reality that is our own entry into Christ's Paschal mystery through our own actual death and resurrection. I would go further to say that in our own actual death, each of us—male or female, lay or ordained—is *th*e priest of our entry into the paschal mystery, able to say: "I am the one who is offering and is offered."

This is the vision of the Church given in the earliest descriptions of the Church as mother: our heavenly mother, in whose womb we are born into life, anticipated already in the

[4] Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1–11* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 22–23, and *passim*.

[5] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 4.1. Trans. in Ignatius, *The Letters*, trans. Alistair Stewart (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2013).

[6] *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 15.2. Trans. in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 333. See Maxwell E. Johnson, "Martyrs and the Mass: The Interpolation of the Narrative of Institution into the Anaphora," *Worship* 87.1 (2013): 2–22.

[7] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 20.2.

sacramental life of worship and lived out throughout the whole course of our life as we take up the cross daily. The Church is embodied, manifest, realized, in each local community: the Church (*ekklesia*) in each place is called out from the world, not into yet another grouping within the world (alongside many others), but rather into the life of the new creation, the eighth day, anticipating that eschatological reality. Which, in turn—or in reverse—means that the Church is really the whole of creation seen eschatologically, for the Church is not only our mother, but also the Bride of Christ, being prepared for the eschatological marriage, to become one with Christ. The Church is thus also the Body of Christ when all things have been brought into subjection to him, so that he in turn can subject all things to God, so that God can be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

If this is the vision of the Church from the earliest days (Paul and John), and which predominated in the early centuries, further reflection on the Church as mother is found in the way that the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary, is spoken of in the hymnography: the New Jerusalem, the Temple containing God, the one whose womb is wider than the heavens. The way Mary is spoken of in these hymns and elsewhere is shaped by the way the Church was already spoken of in prior centuries. The alignment between these two discourses was noted by St Ephrem: "The Virgin Mary is a symbol of the Church, when she receives the first announcement of the Gospel. And, it is in the name of the Church that Mary sees the risen Jesus. Blessed be God, who filled Mary and the Church with joy. We call the Church by the name of Mary, for she deserves a double name."[8]

St. Ephrem of Syria

Coordinating Communities

As the number of Christians grew and there was more than one ecclesial body in a given place, it became necessary to coordinate the activity of these different communities. We see this happening first in big cities such as Rome and Alexandria. The idea that the Church in Rome was a unified body under a single Pope appointed by the apostles is a myth: before any apostle had arrived in Rome, Paul knew of a number of different Christian communities already in existence there (Rom. 16); it was only by the end of the second century or early third that these communities, each led by their own episcopos/presbyter, were coordinated into a number of parishes led by presbyters all under a single episcopos.[9] Working out how these communities should relate to each other was always difficult and fraught. The second-century text known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* describes how there was jostling among the leaders for the "first seats" or for "privileges and reputation"[10]—nothing changes! Over time, this coordination was extended beyond the cities, into a system of dioceses headed by a bishop and comprising parishes headed by the bishop's priests, and then, in due time, ever greater areas (archdioceses, patriarchates, and so on). It was,

[8] Ephrem of Syria, *Sermon on the Night of the Resurrection* (ed. Lamy, 1.534); trans, in L. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary In Patristic Thought*, trans. T. Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 115.

[9] On Rome, see John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–47. More generally, see Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

[10] *The Shepherd of Hermas*, vis. 3, 9.7; sim. 8, 7.4–6. Trans. in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 51, 209.

of course, necessary to coordinate the various local ecclesial communities. But I would be hesitant to use the word "church" for this institutional coordination; or, at least, realize that if we do use the word "church" for the institutional coordination, we are not doing so in the same way that we use it when speaking of our heavenly mother.

Poet and theologian Alexei Khomiakov

We should be careful about how we use words, or we will end up transferring meaning to something that really belongs to something else. We often, in English, use the word "church" for the building, although strictly speaking we should call this the "temple" (*naos*, *khram*). We also sometimes use the word "church" exclusively for the administrative body, as when we ask "what is the church doing?" referring to the bishop and his staff, or when we speak of the "broader" or "extended Church," meaning thereby to include the laity, with good intentions no doubt, but implying that the laity are in fact not part of "the Church" to begin with. Alternatively we use the word "church" for larger ethnic bodies: the Russian Church, the Greek Church, and so on. The problem with this, of course, is that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28)—nor Russian, Romanian, or any other nationality. Equally problematic is the description of any one Church (with perhaps the exception of Jerusalem) as "the mother Church." Rather than "church" it would be better to speak of "synod" or "patriarchate" or something similar.

It is interesting to note that the points made here are reflected in the language of liturgy. In the course of celebrating the Divine Liturgy, the bishop is primarily spoken of as the "archpriest," for it is his priestly ministry that is being exercised here, not his "episcopal" work as overseer or administrator, holding the various communities under his charge together. We pray in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, that by rightly dividing the word of truth, "he may serve your holy churches in peace." The word "church" is used for each of the communities of which he is the head; the diocese over which he has an administrative role is not a church.

From Eucharistic Ecclesiology to Episcopal Ecclesiology

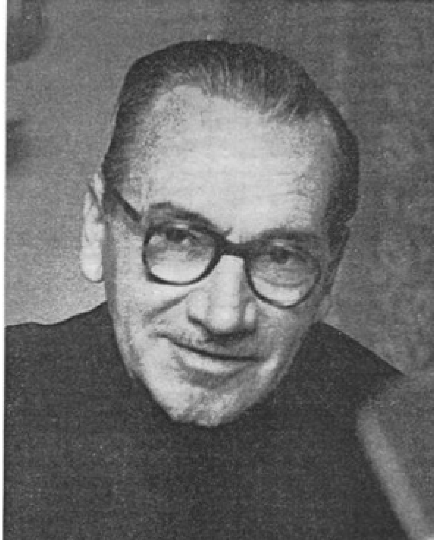
I mentioned at the beginning that, despite the fact that it is the earliest and most fundamental way of speaking about the Church, maternal imagery for the Church is largely absent in modern Orthodox ecclesiology. Modern ecclesiology has of course been presented largely in the form of a eucharistic ecclesiology: "Where the Eucharist is celebrated, there is the Church." It seems that this is really a diaspora phenomenon, at least in its origins.[11] It is bound up with the idea of conciliarity, *sobornost*, which has its roots in nineteenth-century Slavophile thought (and Western parallels). But someone like Alexei Khomiakov, for all his emphasis on the conciliarity of the Church, never equates the conciliar nature of the Church with the Eucharist: for him, the Eucharist is one of the seven sacraments of the Church.

It seems that this changed in the diaspora, with figures such as Father Nicholas Afanasiev, with his emphasis

[11] See John Behr, "Comunione e Conciliarità" / "Communion and Conciliarity," *Album Accademico 2010–11*, (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale), 37–59.

[12] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 8.2.

that the Church is realized in the celebration of the Eucharist. If so, it is perhaps because this was where the emigrés primarily experienced the Church, coming together to celebrate the Eucharist. Once this step is taken and the identification made, however, the horizon inevitably changes, becoming now a matter of boundaries: who is in, who is out? The boundary is established by eucharistic communion, whether it is held to be the local parish (as in Afanasiev) or the diocese ( ). The key issues in ecclesiology then become a matter of territory and hierarchy. Eucharistic ecclesiology morphs into episcopal ecclesiology. Evidence for this having happened is the way in which Saint Ignatius is too often quoted: "Where the bishop is, there is the Church." What he in fact says is, "Where the bishop is, the congregation should be, just as where Christ Jesus is, there is the Church."[12] It is, indeed, a serious mistake to omit the people and Christ himself!



Father Nicholas Afanasiev

Questions of hierarchy and territory of course need to be dealt with, just as, in the earliest period, it was necessary to establish how the different communities would relate. And now, just as then, this was difficult and often resulted in splits. But the main point is that this is not really what we are talking about when we speak of the Church, our heavenly mother, in whose womb we are born into life by taking up the cross. One must also be clear that the transition from eucharistic ecclesiology to episcopal ecclesiology—or the hierarchization or clericalization of the Church—is not the fault of the hierarchy. They do indeed need to work out how they relate to each other (hierarchy and territory again). It is, really, our problem more generally: we seem to have lost sight of what it means to be a child of the Church, for we have misplaced the referent of the word "Church." ❃

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