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THE MYSTERY OF UNITY AMIDST DIVISION SOME ECUMENICAL REFLECTIONS*

The split and the perpetuation of the state of schism – this is one of the most tragic phenomena in the history of Christianity. Division means impoverishment for each side. The course of this division is characterized by antagonisms and conflicts, by mutual alienation, distrust, even hostility and hatred. Division destroys a vital exchange of spiritual values, deprives Christians of the possibility to complement each other and correct any one-sidedness. The mystery of the Church's division is not easy to delve into and to account for. Is it simply a case of human sin and human frailty? Do we reach a fuller and more lasting unity through the experience of division? Is there a kind of providential and mysterious meaning in divisions? How deep is the Church's division? Does the historical fact of division affect ontological unity of the Church? Do more things divide us or unite? In order to answer these questions we must first of all realize that between our Churches already exists a deep ontological unity, which is a continuous call to overcome the visible results of division.

I. THE ALREADY EXISTING ONTOLOGICAL UNITY

Many Christians painfully experience the division in the Church. No doubt there is something tragic in it, although it concerns primarily the canonical and institutional dimension of Christian existence. It remains somehow on the surface of Church life, without reaching the inner ontological depth of its mystery. Having in mind the fact of division in the Church, we speak sometimes symbolically about Christ's torn tunic. And rightly so. The robe is something exte-

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rior with regard to one's body. Division does not reach the depths. It remains on the visible surface. One has to make a clear distinction between the ontological unity of the Church and its empirical or visible unity. The former is the most fundamental one. The latter is, so to say, secondary or derived. The ontological or metaempiric unity of the Church has never been destroyed. The divided Church is still the only Church of the risen Lord in the history of humanity. Any harm done to brotherly relations or even total breaking of them do not destroy the deepest nature of God's gift. They mean only a breaking of the visible ties of communion between Christians. The Church remains one in its ontological or metaempiric dimension. Division affects its visible historical reality. Communion and brotherhood do not find then their visible expression. Human weakness and sinfulness overshadow the full dimensions of the divine-human mystery of the Church.

Lack of visible communion remains only a historical event; it does not destroy ontological unity of the Church. An ideal and all-embracing unity has never been achieved in the history of Christianity. Ontological unity can persist even amidst splits and divisions. Its divine core has never been broken. It remains a bright and shining reality even in an imperfect communion of the Churches. In other words, the one and unique Church of Christ subsists in denominational Churches. None of those, however, should claim to be exclusively identified with the Church of Christ. The whole remains present in the fragment which in turn is always related to this whole. No Church is allowed to ascribe exclusively to itself the full ecclesiality to disadvantage of the other Churches.

The Church in its ontological depth remains one and undivided. Despite of the existing divisions, Christians profess in the Creed that there is one Church – holy, catholic and apostolic. The basic unity has never been entirely lost. It is a gift of the triune God. Division never reaches the innermost roots of the Church's unity. Human sin has not the power to destroy a reality which comes from God Himself and which He sustains. There is only one Church of God – the Church of Christ and His Spirit. The risen Lord of history is its Head. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (*1 Cor. 12:13*). The unity with which God endowed the Church is an ontological reality, rooted in the mystery of divine life itself. That is why divisions contradict the internal nature of the Church. They are contrary to Christ's will.

The belief that the Church has been "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" throughout the ages constitutes the source of ecumenical efforts at overcoming the division of Christianity. The salvation of which God Himself is the author, will continue until the end of times. God's promise that the Church cannot be

destroyed (cf. *Matt.* 16:18; 28:20) is the foundation of hope that no division within Christianity will ever manage to disrupt the ontological unity of the Church. As the work of God, the Church cannot stop being the only one, since it is kept up by the power of the risen Christ and His Spirit. As God is one, His Church by its nature remains only one as well. Divisions obscure, impair and distort its visible form, they are not able, however, to destroy the already existing ontological unity of its sacramental nature.

The problem of unity we seek appears only on the phenomenal or visible level. As God's gift, the unity of the Church is stronger than any divisions. It does not need to be restored in the ontological dimension. Ecumenical efforts consist, first, in discovering the already existing ontological unity given once and for all by God, in the divided Christianity, and, second, in making that unity visible through the restoration of a full ecclesiastical and eucharistic communion. Both these moments are inseparable from each other. Making the visible unity real through restoring a full eucharistic communion is impossible without a previous recognition of the Church's ontological unity in the divided Christianity. The imperative to strive for a visible unity presupposes a belief in the imperishable gift of unity coming from God Himself. The already existing ontological unity of the Church demands a fuller visible realization. That need is stimulated by a feeling of guilt and pain because of the division of Christianity. It is also stimulated by an awareness that more united Christianity would be more credible in the eyes of the world.

The Church is an initial and provisional reality in comparison with the eschatological Kingdom of God. It initiates in human history all that, what by its very nature transcends history. The whole frame of the Church is passing away (cf. *I Cor.* 7:31). As historical and provisional reality, the Church is always on the way towards its eschatological fullness. It anticipates its future fulfilment. The unity of the Church remains likewise only an anticipation, an icon of the eschatological unity in the Kingdom of God, where humanity will exist fully to the image of God who is love. Full unity of the Church is therefore, to a greater extent, a *future* unity than the lost one. Its eschatological model is the unity of the triune God. In the course of human history we can only realize some distant anticipations, i.e. iconic realities of the future unity in God. We are obliged to do it by words and by the prayer of Christ, by His Cross and His resurrection. The authority of Christ's prayer is the highest obligation.

Throughout centuries our Churches have developed different ways of justifying theologically the need for separation. In the Early Church it was motivated by the fact of falling away of some groups from belief in Christ as the true

God and Lord. Later divisions clearly diverge from the christological and trinitarian centre of Christian faith. To justify a division made on account of various historical circumstances, the opposite side was most often accused of distorting the true faith. The history of Christianity abounds in apologetic-confessional tendencies of that kind. This approach is not able to discover the one Church of Christ in a divided Christianity. Each side would rather be inclined to see the *Una Sancta* in its own community which again results in a tendency to build walls and not bridges, to become self-centered and develop one's own confessional traditions.

II. TOWARDS A MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF THE IDENTITY OF FAITH AND SACRAMENTS

The Second Vatican Council in its *Decree on Ecumenism* assumes that, in spite of a bad past record in mutual relations, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have preserved the same faith. The basic unity in faith has never been destroyed. One must only eliminate the existing misunderstandings and acknowledge the other as a "sister Church" which has the right to a legitimate diversity¹. Thanks to that diversity they can complement and enrich each other. The faith living in them is the same.

The Orthodox frequently emphasize that the apostolic faith is reflected in the tradition of the undivided Church. It is worth recalling, however, that even in that period of history there was no full agreement in doctrine and practice. Already then, the Christian East did not share the Roman understanding of primacy. The main differences concerning the way and time of administering the sacraments of Christian initiation go back to the period when the Eastern and Western Churches were in communion. That was a time of common ecumenical councils and common profession of the apostolic faith. Both sides believed that it was one and the same faith uniting them and that the sacraments administered by both Churches were the sacraments of Christ and Holy Spirit.

This implies that the already then existing differences in doctrine and practice were not considered a sufficient reason for a separation. They were thought to be compatible with the unity of common faith. It was, however, a time when a deep awareness of the transcendental character of the mysteries of faith and

¹ *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 17. Cf. also no. 14.

the apophatic character of theological statements still allowed for a legitimate diversity and a sound pluralism within the Church. Only later appeared a tendency to identify faith and its formulations with a specific theology and philosophy.

Our Churches believe in the same God and Jesus Christ who is their Lord and Saviour, acting by the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of all. The Orthodox and the Catholics agree in confessing the basic revealed truths contained in the Scripture, in the early symbols of faith (especially in that of Nicaea-Constantinople, which is the confession of faith of the undivided Church), and in the unanimous faith of Church Fathers expressed above all in the decisions of the ecumenical councils. The role of these fundamental truths of faith is well expressed in the idea of the “hierarchy of truths”² This by no means signifies an arbitrary selection of certain truths at the cost of others, but rather the principle of interpreting the faith of the Church in full awareness of the importance of differentiation in its very content.

When Churches share the same faith in all fundamental Christian truths, then the identity of faith may go well with a diversity of theological views. One Church does not need to accept all the doctrinal views specific to the other one. It will be enough to consider them a possible or acceptable expression of one and the same faith. Besides all differences have to be interpreted in the context of what is common and most fundamental. If our Churches are converted to each other sincerely, it will be possible to say together with St. Cyprian of Carthage: “one can think differently, preserving the right of communion”, “licet diversum sentire, salvo iure communionis”³ This is possible because the Churches wish to communicate the same intention of faith – the intention to do what the Church should do for the salvation of the world.

The Churches should give up their maximalistic claims. An ecumenism based on ideas of returning to the position of one of the partners of the dialogue is bound to fail. Reunion cannot consist in one Church going back to the other. It is possible only through an act of recognizing each other as a “sister Church” within communion of the Churches which serve people and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The communion of the Churches should be based on the most elementary and fundamental formulations of faith. An example in this respect is given by the early Christian confessions of faith, focused on the

² Ibidem, no. 11.

³ CSEL 3/1, p. 435. This was a statement made by St. Cyprian on the synod of Carthage, so related by St. Augustine (*De bapt.* III, 3, 5: PL 43, 141-142).

person of Jesus Christ. He is the personal truth to all Christians, the truth shared by all Churches. The communion of the Churches requires that each one of them should acknowledge the identity of faith in a diversity of views and practices. Mutual acceptance would open up the way for the exchange of charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, given by the Lord of history to each Church. That *perichóresis ton charismāton* is a crucial condition of Christian ecclesiology. Unity is possible. It should be based on the most necessary truths: "in necessariis unitas"⁴

III. THE HOPE TO OVERCOME THE SCHISM BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Christian East and West began to fall apart from each other in a long process of alienation which lasted whole centuries. It was first of all a process involving the disintegration of a common tradition and also the absolutization of individual local traditions. Basic ecclesiological differences became more and more conspicuously outlined. In that process, as we know, not only theological but also cultural and political motives played a very important role. The spirit of exclusiveness had an extremely strong impact on the history of mutual relations. That led to the lack of understanding for different elements of the other side's traditions as well as to the disappearance of tolerance. Each side showed many times a tendency to ascribe an absolute and universal value to its own traditions. Mutual cultural isolation and the lack of vivid exchange of thoughts fostered that process. The Byzantines condemned Latin customs as contrary to the spirit of true Christianity. The Latins did the same, especially after the conquest of Constantinople in 1204, when they demanded that the East should accept the Roman doctrine and liturgical rites. In that way the centuries old split and division in Christianity were intensified.

Today we think in a different way, that is to say more ecumenically. Not only everything which unites but also that which diversifies can be of a charismatic nature. Would it be too bold to think that the division of the Church is a difficult a painful pedagogy, which had to protect the Church from an impoverishing uniformity? Does it not reflect a kind of providential meaning of the schism? This does not, however, change the fact that the division, because of its negative consequences, is primarily a heresy of life, a lack of spiritual cul-

⁴ See Ac. 15:28.

ture, a contradiction of the commandment to love one another. Every Christian has to overcome the division and separation first in himself.

The order of the human world is not only fragile and transient but also quite often heavy and contrary to the breath of God's Spirit, the Lord and the Giver of life. The weight of this situation, on the human level, affects also the Church, which remains divided and reluctantly receives the Spirit's inspiration. There are situations in which one needs a gesture of some prophetic impatience which would be a protest against the situation of division in the Church. It was precisely such an act that happened in the case of V Soloviov's intercommunion, i.e. in the fact of his confession and receiving the Holy Communion from the hands of a Roman-Catholic priest. It was not an act of conversion to Catholicism but rather an expression of his doubts about the empirical reality of both divided Churches. He discovered that their sacramental reality was incomparably more important than historical divisions. This resulted from a conviction that the ontological mystical unity of the two separated Churches had not been destroyed in its deepest nature. There was in his act something of a prophetic protest against the schism between the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church. We may see in it a bold judgement of the existing Church reality, judgement which is dictated by conscience; it was obviously not devoid of paradox and hence was subject to being misunderstood⁵

A brief mention in this context should also be made of the inspired pages which were written over 50 years ago by Fr. S. Bulgakov, one of the most perspicacious Orthodox theologians of the 20th century. He wrote that the division of the Church did not reach deep because "the Church remained one in its sacramental life"⁶ This refers specifically to the Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Divisions in the canonical and dogmatic spheres are not able to destroy the reality of sacramental life in both Churches, especially the Eucharist. It is generally believed that agreement in dogmatic views is a prior condition for reunion in sacramental life. Bulgakov did not hesitate to deny it. According to him, one must look for ways of overcoming dogmatic divergencies in the already existing unity of sacramental life. "Why not seek to overcome doctrinal

⁵ A Polish Orthodox theologian, J. Klinger (†1976) tried to draw attention to this fact. See his: *O istocie prawosławia. Wybór pism* [On the nature of Orthodoxy. Select writings]. Warszawa 1983. p. 291-294.

⁶ *U kladezja lakovlja (Io. 4,23). O real'nom edinstve razdelennoj Cerkvi v vere, molitve i tainstvach*. In: *Christianskoe vozsoedinenie. Ekumeničeskaja problema v pravoslavnom soznanii*. Paris 1933, p. 9-32. quoted p. 29.

heresy through overcoming *the heresy of life*, which is the division? Do not contemporary Christians sin by not hearing an universal eucharistic call and not following it, preoccupied as they are with their passions and divisions?"⁷ The way to the reunion of Catholicism and Orthodoxy leads through participation in the sacraments. One has to be open to the breath of the Holy Spirit which surpasses all divisions and shows the unity which already exists. Till now the Churches have not brought themselves to take that step. They have not managed to forget their past and to seek together a new future. "The way towards the reunion of the East and the West – Bulgakov wrote – does not lead through the Union of Florence and not through tournaments between the theologians, but through a reunion before the altar"⁸ In the other words, reunion on the dogmatic level may result from reunion in the sacraments. The unity which already exists, forms the sufficient basis for the reunion of Churches.

History has deeply furrowed the soil of our sister Churches already. New experiences have been gained. We are no longer in the period of mutual separation and demarcation of particular denominations. The age of ecumenism has implanted a strong desire for reconciliation and reunion. Among new historical experiences begins to appear a new face of the Christian world. More and more we feel the need for a new style of being a Christian today. We are ready to say that our divisions do not reach to heaven. We are more and more conscious that incomparably more unites us than divides. We begin to cherish unity as the gift of Christ and His Spirit. With more and more understanding we repeat the prayer of St. Basil the Great from his *anaphora: Pausón ta schísmata ton ekklesíon*, "Put an end to schisms of the Churches, o Lord!" This prayer coming to us through the centuries is only an echo of the prayer of Jesus himself. We are witnesses of the growing force of mutual intercession and of ecumenical *epiclesis* invoking the Holy Spirit that he may come down on spiritual spaces of Christianity and on its striving for unity as he comes down on the eucharistic gifts and changes them into the greatest gift of the glorified Christ.

The ultimate source of Christian unity is the divine Trinity, acting in human history and communicating divine life to men. The earliest Christian confession has expressed itself in the conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead and sent His own Spirit.

Thus at the very core of Christian unity there are Easter and Pentecost, the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. These

⁷ Ibidem, p. 31. Underlined by Bulgakov himself.

⁸ Ibidem.

are the deepest realities which constitute our unity despite all institutional and canonical divisions. The time of the Church is the new covenant brought about by Christ's death and resurrection, the new age of God's Spirit. This is the presupposition for all the rest, the criterion of the very essence of Christianity.

The real danger seems to be that we are trying too much to create unity to our own image and likeness, instead of accepting it as God's gift already existing. We cannot create unity but only find ways of expressing it. Unity grows of discovery that we share a common experience of the risen Christ and of His Spirit. This paschal experience is our common bond, a common reliance on life, forgiveness and unity which come from God himself.

Uniformity is not only unfeasible but also wrong theologically. It would only result in a new schism. That is why each concern for unity must respect sufficiently its necessary and legitimate diversity. Diversity is as crucial for unity as it is for a living body. Perhaps one of the main reasons for schism and division in the Church have been the attempts to enforce a rigid and too narrow unity. Unity can never be imposed from above. It has to grow from the very depth of the Church's consciousness. The lesson of the so-called uniatism may be very significant also in this respect.

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To end our reflections let us recall the words of an ancient alternative version of the beginning of the Lord's prayer: "Father, let your Holy Spirit come down upon us and cleanse us!" This parallel invocation replacing the words "Your Kingdom come" in *Luke* 11:2 has a very clear pneumatological content. It certainly deserves to be restored to the living consciousness of our Churches. It is not only a prayer asking for purification, but also for transfiguration. It expresses the great confidence in transfiguring and uniting power of the Spirit, the Creator and the Giver of life, who renews the face of the earth.

MISTERIUM JEDNOŚCI POŚRÓD PODZIAŁÓW REFLEKSJE EKUMENICZNE

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł jest skróconą wersją referatu wygłoszonego na sesji plenarnej podczas międzynarodowego sympozjum „Millennium Kościoła rosyjskiego”, odbytego w Joensuu i Heinävesi, w Finlandii (22-24 września 1988 roku).

Autor wychodzi z przekonania, iż podział chrześcijaństwa zagrażaubożeniem każdej ze stron. Rozdarcie i trwanie w stanie podziału uniemożliwiają przede wszystkim żywą wymianę wartości duchowych. Trudno wówczas mówić o wzajemnym dopełnianiu się i korygowaniu jednostronności. Dzieje podziału w chrześcijaństwie nacechowane są konfliktami i antagonizmami wyznaniowymi, wzajemnym wyobcowaniem, nieufnością, a co gorsza – wrogością i nienawiścią. Pomimo swojego tragizmu podział wydaje się jednak czymś więcej niż tylko przejawem ludzkiego grzechu i ludzkiej ułomności. Istnieje, być może, jakiś tajemniczy i opatrnościowy sens podziałów. Należałoby zatem mówić nie tylko o tajemnicy jedności, ale również o tajemnicy podziału. Być może do jedności pełniejszej i trwalszej dochodzi się dopiero poprzez bolesne doświadczenie podziału.

Artykuł usiłuje naświetlić tajemnicę jedności ontycznej, istniejącej pomimo podziałów. Podział pozostaje niejako na powierzchni życia Kościoła, nie dosięgając mistycznej i ontycznej głębi jego tajemnicy. Często wskazuje się na symbolikę rozdartej szaty Chrystusa. Szata jest wszakże czymś zewnętrznym w stosunku do samej osoby. Rozdarcie nie sięga w głąb, lecz pozostaje na płaszczyźnie zjawiskowej, empirycznej i widzialnej. Ontyczna jedność Kościoła nie może być zniszczona. Kościół podzielony istnieje nadal jako jeden Kościół zmartwychwstałego Pana ludzkich dziejów. Pomimo zerwanych więzi braterstwa trwa on nadal jako jedna rzeczywistość zbawcza w swoim wymiarze ontologicznym i metaempirycznym. Jako dar Boży, jedność Kościoła jest silniejsza niż ludzkie podziały. Zadaniem dążeń ekumenicznych jest odkrycie jedności już istniejącej w podzielonym chrześcijaństwie oraz uczynienie jej widzialną poprzez przywrócenie pełnej wspólnoty eklezjalnej i eucharystycznej.

Autor wskazuje na sposoby umożliwiające wzajemne uznanie tożsamości wiary i sakramentów poprzez Kościół katolicki i Kościół prawosławny. Szczególne znaczenie przywiązuje do kategorii „Kościółów siostrzanych” oraz do idei „hierarchii prawd” w nauce chrześcijańskiej. Podkreśla, iż jedność Kościoła możliwa jest tylko we wspólnocie Kościołów, opierającej się na najbardziej podstawowych sformułowaniach wiary chrześcijańskiej. Przypomina, iż starochrześcijańskie wyznania wiary skoncentrowane są wokół osoby Jezusa Chrystusa, który jest osobową Prawdą wszystkich chrześcijan, Prawdą wspólną wszystkim Kościołom.

Ostatnia część artykułu poświęcona jest nadziei przezwyciężenia podziału między Kościołem rzymskokatolickim i Kościołem prawosławnym. Za gest proroczego zniecierpliwienia i protestu przeciwko sytuacji podziału w Kościele uznaje akt jednorazowej spowiedzi i przyjęcia Komunii św. z rąk kapłana katolickiego przez W. Sołowiowa. Podział jest „herezją życia” (S. Bułgakow). Trzeba zdać sobie jasno sprawę z tego, iż nieporównanie więcej nas łączy, niż dzieli. Wszyscy potrzebujemy wzajemnej modlitwy wstawienniczej oraz ekumenicznej epiklezy, przyzywającej Ducha Świętego, aby pozwolił dostrzec dar jedności już istniejącej. Duch Święty jest Duchem różnorodności i wielości darów. Troska o jedność musi iść w parze z poszanowaniem uprawnionej różnorodności. Być może zbyt wiele trudu wkładamy w to, aby tworzyć jedność wedle naszych własnych wyobrażeń, zamiast przyjąć ją jako dar Boży już istniejący.