

## **The Unity of the Kingdom**

**Mother Raphaela**

**Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery, Otega NY**

I want to build on the concept of knowledge I introduced in my previous talk. I believe all attempts to approach Christian unity which rely on discussions of history, theology and practice are doomed to failure. We've been there and done that. And as the saying goes, it is a form of insanity to keep doing the same things and expect to get different results. We could stay here 'till the cows come home, discussing and debating the relative merits of all the thousands of Christian or pseudo-Christian groups that exist here in America, let alone throughout the world. We Orthodox are not exempt from this condition of disunity, although we do tend to fight over things like whether we are Greek or Russian, whether women should have their hair covered in church and men should wear ponytails. We leave it to our Protestant brethren to debate whether it is necessary for a Christian to believe that Jesus is God; whether He really resurrected; whether there is a Trinity, whether the rite of Holy Communion is simply a memorial service or an actual participation in the Body and Blood of Christ and (perhaps the most unmentionable topic of all), whether we can honor the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, or *Theotokos*. Officially, while we would say that the Pope was the first Protestant, the Roman Catholics are with us on the above topics, but in some areas it seems the Roman Catholic Church is going through the Reformation all over again and some find themselves closer to Protestant groups than to the Orthodox Church.

I question, however, whether we Orthodox should pride ourselves on the pettiness of our divisions. The Lord said, "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much."<sup>1</sup> I can practically guarantee that there are non-Orthodox in this room who stay away from us precisely because of our arrogance in

proclaiming that we have the true faith while at the same time justifying our division into a multitude of ethnic jurisdiction. I know Episcopalians, or Anglicans as they now prefer to be called, who claim to be orthodox simply by being organized along similar ethnic lines.

Of course we Orthodox are also the last hold-outs to open communion and seemingly, therefore, the Christians least interested in the unity of Christ's Body on earth. If truth be told, there are Orthodox Christians who do absolutely refuse to dialogue with any non-Orthodox, and even have trouble sitting down to a friendly discussion with other members of their own jurisdiction who might believe differently about "ecumenism." I believe, however, it can be shown very easily that they are being non-traditional and acting in a non-"patristic" spirit that is contrary not only to Scripture but also to the fathers and mothers of the Church, beginning with St. Paul, going on through St. Justin the Martyr and St. Clement in the early Church, St. Basil, St. Macrina with the other "Cappadocians" who lived and taught during the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, Ss Cosmas and Damian in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, St. Gregory Palamas in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, down closer to our own era with missionaries and teachers of the Church such as St. Herman of Alaska, Ss Innocent and Tikhon of Moscow and for some of us, our contemporaries, Father Alexander Schmemmann of Crestwood and Father Alexander Menn of Russia.

But let us continue a survey of the contemporary Christian scene. And I admit that I am not an unbiased observer here. From what I have read and observed, some Christian groups are based on the premise that especially from the time of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, God abandoned His Church to the error and corruption which were cleaned up only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Martin Luther and the other "Reformers."<sup>ii</sup> Other groups, including some Baptists, would claim that they are not Protestants; that there was a hidden or, to use an expression also favored by some traditionalist Orthodox, catacomb church that continued to believe and practice the pure faith during and after

the 4<sup>th</sup> century when the arch-corruptor, St. Constantine, declared Christianity to be the religion of the Roman Empire. As with Protestant groups, however, this pure religion could only be practiced freely and openly once the errors of Constantine's corruptions were revealed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Then we have groups that teach very clearly that Jesus is not God while at the same time referring to themselves as Christian. Here we have the Jehovah's Witnesses, the last true Arians, who believe Jesus to be the Incarnate Word; the "first-born of creation," and who accept His pre-existence while denying His divinity. I'm sure I do not understand the teachings of the Mormons, but I think somehow they have a variation on this, although they as well as several other groups would claim that theirs is the only true faith. Any discussions I have had with Mormons have led me to believe that they, like the Seventh Day Adventists, see "teachings" more in terms of moral and ethical direction, including dietary prohibitions, rather than theology. While these groups believe Jesus is important, and use terminology borrowed from the classic Christian tradition, they deny both His divinity and belief in the Trinity. Some quasi-Hindu groups as well call themselves Christian and use Christian vocabulary such as "Christ" and "Incarnation" with meanings very different from almost all other Christian groups.

Does "the Unity of the Kingdom" mean that eventually we will all get it sorted out; that we all really believe in the same God, along with Jews, Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists; we just happen to be comfortable with various forms of belief and practice? We even make jokes that up in heaven, God will have different rooms for each different group, and in all seriousness believe that is what Jesus meant when He said "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"<sup>iii</sup>

With Jews and Moslems, we do believe that God is One. It can be demonstrably argued that the genius of Mohammed was to take what he saw as the best of Judaism and Christianity and create a synthesis that he felt would be acceptable to his people. There is no question that he succeeded in this. It can even be demonstrably argued, given the influence of Islam in Europe in the late Middle Ages, that the “*Sola Scriptura*” of western Christians during and after the time of the Reformation owes something to Mohammed’s insistence that his text be taken as infallible. He could not appeal to a living body of tradition; his claim was that he wrote the Koran under direct divine inspiration, in the same way that some Christian groups seem to claim the Biblical writers wrote the Old and New Testaments.

I could continue, but I think that is enough analysis of the present situation of “communities of faith.”

Perhaps not everyone is familiar with a mythical story told of Alexander the Great. One of the kings of Gordion (the capital of Phrygia in central Anatolia, modern Turkey, from 1100-200 B.C.), dedicated his chariot to Zeus who allegedly helped him tie the yoke to the pole in an intricate knot. The king declared that whoever could untie this knot would become the ruler of the world. Many wise men, many rulers came, studied it, puzzled over it and tried to unravel it, but all in vain. In 334 B.C., young Alexander came to Gordion. He took one look at the knot and unraveled it with one stroke of his sword. Then it is said that he turned and proclaimed, “Thus do I unravel all Gordion Knots,” and went on to conquer the world.

For some reason the situation of Christendom reminds me of the Gordion Knot. “...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart,” says the apostle to the Hebrews.<sup>iv</sup> Jesus Christ, the Word of God, our Lord God and Savior, is

alive and well, and very capable of taking on any and all Gordian Knots. But many Christians don't seem to believe that. Efforts at unity seem more to involve holding conferences, workshops, referendums – the equivalent of sitting down, like the wise men and rulers of our story, attempting to unravel our tangled situation by human wisdom, study and efforts. We need the Unity of the Kingdom, not our own plans of merger. We do not own parts of the Body of Christ like companies we can modify and dispose of by majority vote or takeover, hostile or otherwise.

It comes down, I think, to the very simple question Jesus asked His disciples in Palestine all those long years ago. “But who do you say that I am?”<sup>v</sup> How many manifestos, volumes of theology, and articles of faith have been written and published in various human attempts to answer that question? It is the question He asks of us still, and as the Father answers through us, we find the unity of His Holy Spirit in His eternal Kingdom. All the answers that have not led us to this unity come from “flesh and blood.”<sup>vi</sup>

If we believe in a living, personal God Who is in total charge of the created universe, whose Spirit can guide us and lead us into all truth,<sup>vii</sup> we will be willing to wait upon Him. We will understand that as long as our attempts at unity are attempts to create a humanly strong, powerful Christian Body, we will fail. He will continue to humble us by our divisions until we come to see with St. Paul that the power of God is made perfect in human weakness.<sup>viii</sup> “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”<sup>ix</sup> Look how arrogant we can be even in our pitifully divided state. If by some tour de force we were able to wave the equivalent of a magic wand and wake up with all the present groups who claim to be Christian unified into one large organization, I believe that the result would be horribly demonic. We are no better than those who went before us and we have the technology to wreak

far greater devastation than they. If they could not resist the temptations to sponsor inquisitions, witch hunts, pogroms, – all in the name of Christ – I shudder to think what we could and would do. We are very capable of losing the vision of our eyes that allows us to see the difference between right and wrong. It seems to me there are very clear examples of this. One which comes to my mind and lies heavy on my heart is based on the experiences I have had with Christians who protest torture in the killing of lobsters for food, but who do not bat an eye at the torture and dismembering of a human infant with obviously well-developed senses; an infant that under other circumstances would have received the best of care in a clinic for premature births. We may shudder at archaeological findings of mass graveyards of infants killed at birth or shortly thereafter in sacrifices to the gods of early nations, but those infants had a prayer said over their remains; they were not tossed out as garbage. Dare we say that we are better in our days?

Yes, in the midst of this tangled, sinful, human situation, we do well to be humble. Let us be strong in the Lord, but for His glory, not for our own sakes. We need to be sure that we are grounded and rooted in Him; that we grow into the Eucharistic life He gives us as Christians. As it says in the book of Revelation, we are to give thanks and glory to Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father,<sup>x</sup> priests to serve on behalf of all mankind and all of creation. As priests, we are called first to offer sacrifice for ourselves,<sup>xi</sup> then to raise up to God that part of creation which has been given into our stewardship. Further, we are not to bow down or enslave ourselves to things which have no life in themselves, whether they be gods of the intellect, money or art, or demons of pride, gluttony, lust or anger.

Let us seek soundness for our eyes<sup>xii</sup> so that we may see creation, others and the world around us as windows through which the glory of God shines. “To the pure, all things are pure; to the corrupt, all things are corrupt.”<sup>xiii</sup> The whole of creation is given life by God and created good,<sup>xiv</sup> capable of redemption and of proclaiming His glory, not meant to be co-opted by fallen creatures for their own twisted agendas.

Einstein is quoted as saying: “For some people there are no miracles. For others, all of life is a miracle.” May we learn to say with the Psalmists, “How manifold are Your works, O Lord! In wisdom have You made them all!”<sup>xv</sup> “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims His handiwork!”<sup>xvi</sup>

If we can see God present in and through His creation, in the smallest particle of energy making up the smallest part of an atom on earth as well as in the furthest reaches of space, we can also come to see Him present in the bread and wine of communion. Christ’s sacrifice of Himself on behalf of all mankind and all creation is eternally present to us whether or not we choose to enter into that reality. If His death and sacrifice seem too far away to be meaningful to us, then perhaps our hearts will be stirred by those Christians in our own lifetime who have suffered and continue to suffer for the sake of Christ. The Church produced far more martyrs in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than under three centuries of persecutions under the Roman Empire. There are all-too-frequent bulletins from Kosovo, Palestine, Indonesia, China, North Korea, not to mention the streets of our own cities, asking prayers for those who are suffering, being persecuted and killed for the sake of truth and righteousness. May we not take their sacrifice lightly. Christ did not die on the Cross, and these people, including infants, are not being tortured and maimed, living and dying in such conditions, so that we can organize church trips to the nearest Casino. Rather let us ask to be counted worthy of becoming disciples of Christ, of taking up our Cross

daily and following Him.<sup>xvii</sup> May we learn to say with St. Paul, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”<sup>xviii</sup> If enslaved by the passions of this life<sup>xix</sup> we do not have the freedom to take on such suffering, let us at least take up the cross and suffering of fighting against these same passions, calling on the redeeming Passion of Christ.

We Orthodox say that the bread and cup of communion consummate our commitment, our marriage with the Lamb, in His Body which is the Church just as we would say that the marriage bed consummates the commitment already made between a man and a woman, rather than being something that is tried out ahead of time to see if it will work. We do not condemn those outside the Orthodox Church who have other practices nor, for example, do we refrain from communion at a Protestant service, because we do not believe that Christ is present. He is present everywhere and fills all things. We acknowledge, rather, the differences that exist in belief and practice; that while we recognize the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, others will receive the cup with a very different vision.

Recognizing that unity of faith, love and practice does not exist here does not lessen our commitment, indeed our obligation, to pray that God’s Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let us all indeed pray to God that even in our days He will count us worthy to be found in His eternal Kingdom. There, where all creation shares in the life and the vision of God, may we find ourselves and one another in the Unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace which He alone gives together with His only begotten Son, our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Luke 16:10

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Gallatin, Matthew. *Thirsting for God in a Land of Shallow Wells*. Ben Lomond, CA, Conciliar Press: 2002

<sup>iii</sup> John 14:2

<sup>iv</sup> Hebrews 4:12

- 
- v Matthew 16:15
  - vi Matthew 16:17
  - vii John 16:13
  - viii II Corinthians 12:9
  - ix I Corinthians 1:25
  - x Revelation 1:5-6
  - xi Hebrews 7:27
  - xii Matthew 6:22
  - xiii Psalm 18:26 and Titus 1:15
  - xiv Genesis 1:31
  - xv Psalm 104:24
  - xvi Psalm 19:1
  - xvii Luke 9:23
  - xviii Colossians 1:24
  - xix Romans 6:6