

This is a chapter from *The Non-Orthodox: The Orthodox Teaching on Christians Outside of the Church*. This book was originally published in 1999 by Regina Orthodox Press in Salisbury, MA (Frank Schaeffer's publishing house). For the complete book, as well as reviews and related articles, go to <http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/status.aspx>. (© Patrick Barnes, 1999, 2004)

V. An Evaluation of Heterodox Baptism

Given that Holy Baptism is the “doorway into the Church,” the question of the validity of heterodox sacraments is crucial to our topic. Non-Orthodox Christians who wrestle with this issue often phrase it in this way:

If I (speaking as a Protestant) have put on Christ through Baptism (Gal. 3:27), and am therefore a member of His Body (Eph. 5:30); and if His Body is the Church (Eph. 1:22-23), then am I not also a member of the Church? And if the Orthodox Church is the ‘one True Church,’ how can I not be a member of it in some sense?⁵⁶

A full treatment of how Orthodox should view the sacraments of heterodox Christians is beyond the scope of this work. What follows is merely a brief summary of what has been stated so eloquently and thoroughly by others.⁵⁷

Although certain Orthodox would argue differently today, the traditional teaching is that the Church does not recognize the spiritual “validity” or efficacy of heterodox sacraments *per se*—*i.e.*, in and of themselves, apart from the Church. Baptism is only given *by* and *in* the Church, “the eternal keeper of [ecclesial] grace” (Saint Seraphim of Sarov). Those who have never been in visible communion with the Orthodox Church are, from Her standpoint, *unbaptized*. This is the only theologically consistent position that can be derived from a thorough study of Holy Tradition—in particular, the Sacred Canons.

The Sacred Canons and Ecclesial Boundaries

⁵⁶ This question was asked of Father Thomas Hopko, Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, by the author during a lecture which the former gave at the Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption in Seattle, Washington on November 2, 1996. Part of Father Hopko's answer, which seemed good at the time, is critiqued in Appendix I.

⁵⁷ See the following key works: Archbishop Hilarion (Troitsky), *The Unity of the Church and the World Conference of Christian Communities* (Montreal: Monastery Press, 1975); Father George Metallinos, *I Confess One Baptism* (Mt. Athos: St. Paul's Monastery, 1994; distributed by the Monastery of the Holy Ascension in Resaca, GA); *The Rudder*, trans. D. Cummings (Chicago: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957); Timothy [now Bishop Kallistos] Ware, *Eustratios Argenti: A Study of the Greek Church Under Turkish Rule*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); “The Form of Holy Baptism,” *The True Vine*, Summer 1989, No. 2; “The Reception of Converts,” *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XI, No. 1, pp. 6-11; and “Baptism and Grace” by Father Gregory Telepneff, *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. III, No. 1). See also the “Baptism and the Reception of Converts” page (OCIC) for numerous supplementary articles.

Apostolic Canons 46, 47, and 50 are the earliest written decrees, or pastoral guidelines, on the reception of converts:

Canon 46: We order that a bishop or presbyter that recognized the baptism or sacrifice of heretics be defrocked. For “what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:15).

Canon 50: If a bishop or presbyter conduct an initiation [*i.e.* baptism] and perform not three immersions, but one immersion—that administered into the Lord's death—let him be anathema.⁵⁸

Canon 1 of the Synod of Carthage (c. 258), confirmed and upheld by the Sixth Ecumenical Synod, is another authoritative and representative expression of the Church's position regarding the non-Orthodox. It is worth quoting at length, as it aptly summarizes the Orthodox view of heterodox sacraments:

While assembled in Council, beloved brethren, we read letters sent by you, concerning those among the heretics and schismatics presuming to be baptized who are coming over to the catholic Church which is one, in which we are baptized and regenerated. . . . Decreeing now also by vote what we firmly and securely hold for all time, we declare that no one can possibly be baptized outside the catholic Church, there being but one baptism, and this existing only in the catholic Church. . . .

. . .the [baptismal] water must first be purified and sanctified by the priest, in order that it may be capable of washing away the sins of the person being baptized when he is thereinto immersed. And through the Prophet Ezekiel, the Lord says: “And I will sprinkle you with clean water, and cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart, and I will give you a new spirit” (Ezek. 36:25). But how can he who is himself unclean, and with whom there is no Holy Spirit, purify and sanctify water, with the Lord saying in the book of Numbers: “And everything the unclean man touches shall be unclean” (Num. 19:22)? How can he who was not able to rid himself of his own sins, being as he is outside the Church, baptize and grant remission of sins to another? . . . Moreover, it is necessary that he who has been baptized be chrismated, so that receiving the chrism he become a partaker of Christ. But the heretic cannot sanctify oil, seeing that he has neither altar nor Church. It is not possible for there to exist any chrism whatsoever among the heretics. For it is obvious to us that oil can by no means be sanctified among them for such worthy use. And we ought to know and not ignore that it has been written: “Let not the oil of a sinner anoint my head,” which the Holy Spirit even long ago declared in the Psalms (140:6); lest anyone be tracked down and led astray from the right way and be chrismated by the heretics, the enemies of Christ.

⁵⁸ Except where noted, citations of Sacred Canons related to Holy Baptism are taken from Appendix I of *I Confess One Baptism*. The translations are more accurate than those in *The Rudder*.

After reiterating the point that that one who is outside the Church is deprived of all mysteriological Grace, the Synod concludes:

Baptism being one, and the Holy Spirit being one, there is also but one Church, founded upon (Peter the Apostle of old confessing) oneness by Christ our Lord. And for this reason, whatever is performed by them [*i.e.* the heretics] is reprobate, being as it is counterfeit and void. For nothing can be acceptable or desirable to God which is performed by them, whom the Lord in the Gospels calls His foes and enemies: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Mt.12:30). And the blessed Apostle John, in keeping with the Lord's commands, wrote in his epistle: "You have heard that the Antichrist is coming, and now many antichrists have appeared" (1 Jn. 2:18). Hence we know it is the last hour. They came out from among us, but they were not from among us. Therefore, we too ought to understand and consider that the enemies of the Lord, and the so-called antichrists, would not be able to gratify the Lord. And therefore, we who have the Lord with us, and who hold fast to the unity of the Lord, abundantly supplied as we are in proportion to His excellence, and exercising His priesthood in the Church: we ought to disapprove, and refuse, and reject, and consider profane everything done by those opposed to Him, *i.e.* His foes the antichrists. And we ought to impart in full the mystery of divine power, unity, faith and truth unto those who from error and perversity come to us for knowledge of the Church's true faith.

Additional Canons could be cited, including the oft-debated Canon 7 of the Second Ecumenical Synod and the nearly identical Canon 95 of the Sixth. All of these Canons reflect the Church's *indisputable dogmatic boundaries* which the Holy Spirit inspired the Fathers to delineate. These boundaries remain binding on the Church to this day.

The Principle of Economy: Explained and Applied

When the Orthodox Church receives converts by means other than Baptism, it is always and only by what is called economy (Gr., *oikonomia*). Since this term is both critical to our study and often misunderstood, let us consider Bishop Kallistos' superb explanation of it in his scholarly work *Eustratios Argenti: A Study of the Greek Church Under Turkish Rule*:

The Greek word *oikonomia* signifies literally "the management of a household or family" (so Liddell and Scott), *oikonomos* meaning a "steward". In a religious context economy can be exercised either by God or by the Church. It indicates God's management of His creation, His providential ordering of the world, and in particular the supreme act of divine providence, the Incarnation, which the Greek Fathers call "the

Economy” without further qualification [cf. also Saint John 3:16; Saint Matt. 9:13]. But since the activity of the Church is integrally connected with the action of God in Christ, the term economy can be used not only of what God does but of what the Church does. In a wider sense it covers all those acts whereby the Church orders the affairs of her own household and provides for the needs of her members. In a narrower sense it signifies the power to bind and loose, conferred by the risen Christ (John xx. 21-22); and so it covers any departure from the strict rules of the Church [Gr., *akribeia*], whether in the direction of greater rigour or (as is more usual) of greater leniency. Economy therefore includes much of what is covered by the western term “dispensation”, but it extends to many other things as well and is not simply a term in Canon Law.

To understand the application of economy to non-Orthodox sacraments, three points should be kept in mind:

(1) The basic principle underlying its use is that the Church has been endowed by God with authority to manage the affairs of her own household. She is therefore in a full sense the steward (*oikonomos*) and sovereign administrator of the sacraments; and it falls within the scope of her stewardship and economy to make valid—if she so thinks fit—sacraments administered by non-Orthodox, *although such sacraments are no sacraments if considered in themselves and apart from the Orthodox Church*. Because a person’s Baptism is accepted as valid—or rather made valid by economy—when he becomes Orthodox, *it does not therefore follow that his Baptism was valid before he became Orthodox*. The use of economy implies no recognition of the validity of non-Orthodox sacraments *per se*; it is something that concerns only the sacraments of those entering the Orthodox Church.

(2) Economy is *only exercised where the formal conditions necessary for validity are present*. The Church, when she makes valid a sacrament originally administered outside her borders, naturally demands that the external requirements essential for the accomplishment of the sacrament *shall have been previously fulfilled*: that is to say, those actions must have been already performed which, had they been carried out within the Church, would have sufficed to ensure a valid sacrament. Orders, for example, could not be recognized if the Christian body in question had lost the outward elements of the Apostolic succession. [And Baptisms should be not be recognized if they were not performed according to the Apostolic form of triple immersion in the Name of the Holy Trinity.]

(3) The aim of all “economic” activities of the Church is practical—the salvation of souls [cf. 1 Tim. 2:4; Acts 14:27]. The Church has rules, but unlike the Old Israel she is not rigidly bound to them; it lies within her power of household management or economy to contravene the strict letter of the law if the purpose of the law will thereby be more fully achieved. (Closely linked with the concept of economy is the idea of *philanthropia*, loving kindness towards men: the Church, following the example of Jesus her Head, makes allowance for the weakness of men and seeks never to lay on them a burden too heavy for them to bear.) Because economy is something practical, its application need not be everywhere the same, but may be changed according to circumstances. Its exercise in one way at a particular time and place creates no binding precedent for the future, and does not commit the Church to following the same practice in other places and at other times. “He who does something by economy”, wrote Theophylact of Bulgaria, “does it, not as good in an unqualified sense, but as profitable on a particular occasion.”

This helps to explain the *apparent inconsistency* of Orthodox when receiving converts. From the viewpoint of modern western sacramental theology, the variations in the

Greek and Russian attitude towards Latin Baptism indicate a state of intolerable vagueness and confusion. But once the principle of economy is taken into account—so Orthodox argue—it will be realized that there *has been no change in Orthodox ecclesiology or sacramental theology, but simply a change in disciplinary practice*. The Orthodox Church has sometimes been willing to use economy, and sometimes not; *but this does not mean that her sacramental teaching as such has varied*.

Guided always by practical considerations, Orthodoxy has exercised economy when this aided the reconciliation of heterodox *without obscuring the truths of the Orthodox faith*; but when leniency seemed to endanger the well-being of the Orthodox flock, exposing them to infiltration and encouraging them to indifferentism and apostasy, then the Church authorities resorted to strictness.⁵⁹

Therefore, a declaration by an Orthodox Bishop that a person's non-Orthodox baptism is valid simply means that the Church recognizes in the heterodox rite previously experienced by the person seeking reception a *form* (i.e., Apostolic: triple immersion) and *intention* (of the heterodox group—i.e., to baptize into what they consider to be the Church) that do not need repetition. When the person is received by *oikonomia*, the empty baptismal form is filled with ecclesial Grace by the Holy Spirit.

The use of economy is seen in the Canons themselves, e.g., Canon 7 of the Second Œcumenical Synod, Canon 95 of the Sixth Œcumenical Synod, and the First Canonical Letter of Saint Basil the Great. The Second and Sixth Œcumenical Synods confirmed and upheld the aforementioned Canon 1 of Carthage, as well as those of the Holy Apostles

⁵⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 82-85, emphases ours. Ecumenist-minded opponents of the principle of economy will often point out that the eminent Russian Orthodox theologian, Father Georges Florovsky, was critical of it. One essay in particular which is frequently bandied about is "The Boundaries of the Church" (*Collected Works*, Vol. XIII, pp. 36-45). Never mentioned by these detractors, however, are the following remarks in that essay on the timelessness and authority of St. Cyprian's theology:

The teaching of St. Cyprian on the gracelessness of sects is related to his teaching on unity and communality. This is not the place or the moment to recollect and relate St. Cyprian's deductions and proofs. Each of us remembers and knows them, is bound to know them, is bound to remember them. They have not lost their force to this day. The historical influence of St. Cyprian was continuous and powerful. Strictly speaking, the theological premises of St. Cyprian's teaching have never been disproved. Even St. Augustine was not so very far from St. Cyprian. He argued with the Donatists, not with St. Cyprian himself, and he did not confute St. Cyprian; indeed, his argument was more about practical measures and conclusions. In his reasoning about the unity of the Church, about the unity of love, as the necessary and decisive condition of the saving power of the sacraments, St. Augustine really only repeats St. Cyprian in new words. (*Ibid.*, Vol. XIII, p. 36)

A former student and friend of Father Georges, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, helps us resolve this seeming contradiction in his mentor's thought by stating that this essay was mainly a heuristic exercise written early in Father Georges' career (1933). The passage concerning St. Cyprian's theology stands *per se* as truthful, reflecting as it does the *dogmatic* teaching of the Church. Fr. George was merely attempting to set forth his own opinions at the time on the *practical application* of this theology—i.e., *oikonomia*. He later disavowed the very views that are misused by so many today. (See the OCIC for numerous unpublished articles on the life and thought of Fr. Georges.)

and Ecumenical Fathers—all of which held to *akribeia* with respect to heterodox sacraments. For example, Canon 2 of the Sixth Ecumenical Synod reads:

On the other hand, we ratify all the rest of the sacred Canons promulgated by our holy and blissful Fathers, to wit: . . .the Canon promulgated by Cyprian who became an Archbishop of the country of Africa and a martyr, and by the Council supporting him. . .in accordance with the custom handed down to them; and no one shall be permitted to countermand or set aside the Canons previously laid down, or to recognize and accept any Canons, other than the ones herein specified, that have been composed under a false inscription by certain persons who have taken in hand to barter the truth. If, nevertheless, anyone be caught innovating with regard to any of the said Canons, or attempting to subvert it, he shall be responsible of that Canon and shall receive the penance which it prescribes and be chastised by that Canon which he has offended.⁶⁰

This same Synod—in Canon 95—goes on to uphold Canon 7 of the Second Ecumenical Synod, which directs that certain heretical and schismatic groups be received by *oikonomia*, both for the welfare of their souls and of the Church at that time.

Thus, a common, but false, interpretation of Canons 7 and 95 that suggests a recognition of the validity of heterodox sacraments *per se* is indefensible, for it would mean that the Holy Fathers of these Ecumenical Synods contradicted themselves on fundamental dogmatic issues related to ecclesiastical order. For an Orthodox Christian with a proper understanding of Holy Tradition, contradictions of this nature are an impossibility. As the famous interpreter of the Church canons, Theodore Balsamon, Patriarch of Antioch, once stated: “Preserve the canonical decrees, wherever and however they should be phrased; and say not that there are contradictions among them, for the All-holy Spirit has worded them all.”⁶¹ Therefore, any *apparent* contradictions in the Sacred Canons of a dogmatic nature can only be properly explained—if one is to remain faithful to the Church’s self-understanding as reflected in the consensus of Holy Tradition—as examples of *oikonomia* on the synodal level.⁶²

⁶⁰ *The Rudder*, p. 294.

⁶¹ The Interpretation of Canon XC of the Council of Trullo as cited in *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (May-June, 1977), p. 50.

⁶² A large part of Father George Metallinos’ meticulously researched book is taken up with the resolution of this issue. In a summary statement, he writes:

Whereas “the Apostles” and the earlier Councils and Fathers applied *akribeia*, the two Ecumenical Councils accepted *economia*. So, this alternation of *akribeia* and *economia* under certain de-fined conditions [*i.e.*, Apostolic form] removes any hint of contradiction among the holy Canons and the Councils. (*op. cit.*, p. 54)

Also, an interesting example of *oikonomia* on the synodal level is found in Canon 77 of Carthage (c. 418):

It has pleased the Council to have letters sent to our brethren and fellow bishops, and especially to the Apostolic See, in which our adorable brother and fellow minister Anastasius afore-mentioned [*i.e.*, St.

It should be obvious by now that the term “validity” can be misleading. As has been shown, there are two senses in which it can be used: validity *per se*, and validity *upon reception into the Church*—*i.e.*, “having acceptable form and intent so as to allow a proper use of economy.”⁶³ The latter understanding of validity is the only one that can be defended by Holy Tradition. Too often, upon hearing or reading that a person’s Baptism was “valid,” many assume that this indicates the first sense of the term: validity *per se*. However, this is incorrect.

In no sense is this “acceptance,” as a young Orthodox theologian has recently pointed out in his study of the much abused and misused First Canon of Saint Basil, anything more than a recognition of the “charismatic quality,” as Father Florovsky has expressed it, of a non-Orthodox sacramental act. The mystery of Orthodox baptism, by which we “. . . accept the death of our propensity for visible things,” to quote Saint Maximos the Confessor, involves not only an immersion into the inner life of the Church, but signifies a move away from the external grace that touches those outside Orthodoxy to that internal grace which is a sign of those baptized into Orthodoxy.⁶⁴

It is apparent that a more careful and qualified use of the term “validity,” or the creation of a different term, is greatly needed.

Anastasius I], since he knows Africa to be in great need, so that for the sake of the peace and usefulness of the Church, even through the Donatists, of whom whatever ones are Clerics, provided their instruction is corrected, and willing to come over to the catholic unity, in accordance with the voluntary choice and resolution of each individual catholic Bishop governing the church in the same region, if this appear to conduce to the peace of the Christians, to readmit them in their own honors, just as also in previous times it was evidently done in regard to the same dissension, a fact attested by the examples of many and nearly all churches in Africa wherein such error arose. . . . Whereby in every way the catholic unity must be advanced and consummated to the manifest profit of brotherly souls in those regions in which they are living, to the end that no obstacle may be set up against what has been decided in regard to their honors. . . . (*The Rudder*, pp. 649-650).

⁶³ Key works which make this distinction are *I Confess One Baptism* and the two-part essay by J. Cotsonis, “The Validity of Anglican Orders,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* (Spring 1958-Summer 1958).

⁶⁴ Archbishop Chrysostomos, “BEM and Orthodox Spirituality,” p. 56. He continues:

Baptism outside of the Orthodox Church, then, is an act detached from the inner life of the Church and separated from the special state of enlightenment that rises above those who, while confessing Christ and honoring the form of baptism put forth in the Gospels, nonetheless are not part of the evangelical call to struggle that is embodied in death to one’s self and to the “putting on of Christ” within Orthodoxy. *Oikonomia*, like a magnet of evangelical love, draws those who have embraced the iron faith of Christ. In accepting a non-Orthodox act of baptism, it takes that iron, melts it on the forge of the Church’s divine authority, and gives it form and internal strength. In no sense, however, does it recognize that which is purportedly spiritual formation outside Orthodoxy to be anything other than crude filaments of faith. There is but one baptism, if indeed there are many callings and many confessions. And that one baptism is not one in form, but one in grace-bestowing efficacy, rising out of the unique and exclusive authority of the criterion of truth which is the Orthodox faith.

Is Heterodox Baptism Merely a “Pagan Rite”?

Does it follow that to affirm the traditional view regarding the invalidity of heterodox sacraments *per se* one must also affirm that everyone outside of the Church is “completely pagan”? Must one insist—as do some when characterizing the Traditionalist view—that heterodox Baptism is a completely insignificant event or an “empty pagan ritual,” devoid of *any* meaning or Grace? To all such questions, Traditionalist Orthodox Christians can answer in the negative. The subtlety of Patristic thought serves to foster a nuanced approach that—coupled with a heart flowing with love and compassion for the heterodox—can most adequately address this dilemma.

On the one hand, heterodox baptism certainly is not true Baptism—an initiation into the *pleroma* of Grace within the Church. Yet on the other hand, it is proper to acknowledge a certain “charismatic quality” in heterodox rites. This leads us to some of the intricacies in the Patristic conception of Grace. Father Gregory Telepneff cites Saint Diadochus of Photiki in order to elucidate this. It is noteworthy that this Saint’s comments are entirely consistent with the ones cited earlier by Sts. Theophan the Recluse and Seraphim of Sarov:

“Before holy Baptism, grace encourages the soul from the outside, while Satan lurks in its depths, trying to block all the noetic faculty’s ways of approaching the Divine. But from the moment that we are reborn through Baptism, the demon is outside, grace is within. Thus whereas before Baptism error ruled the soul, after Baptism truth rules it. Nevertheless, even after Baptism Satan (can) still act upon the soul. . . .”

If my reading of the Holy Fathers is correct, what the saving acts of Christ make possible is the appropriation of grace by man himself—making “grace his own,” which in turn totally renews and transforms the entire person. That is to say, a real metaphysical, ontological change can now take place in the baptized person, if—as Saint Gregory Nyssa tells us in his *Catechetical Oration*—he lives virtuously and makes his baptism effective in Faith and the spiritual life.

In saying what we have about grace and baptism, we have not said that non-Orthodox are totally without grace, indistinguishable from pagans. No indeed. If I understand Saint Maximos correctly, Christ (and hence grace) can be found in virtue itself. A virtuous man takes on grace by virtue of virtue, since virtue proceeds from spiritual reality. Of course, without the radical ontological transformation that takes place in the Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church, such grace cannot be appropriated and cannot be made “one’s own.” Nevertheless, as we see in the words of Saint Diadochus, grace is still present—though acting from without, rather than from within. And so, it is this internal-external distinction which separates Orthodox baptism from non-Orthodox baptism: the Orthodox baptism does what Christ, the Apostles, and the Church always intended it to do—it transforms man from within, totally renewing the true human nature and opening the way for potential communion with the divine.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Telepneff, “Baptism and Grace,” pp. 77-78.

Conclusion

Though we cannot ultimately know the extent to which heterodox rites are externally Grace-bestowing, it is certainly reasonable—as well as faithful to the Patristic consensus and experience—to affirm that “non-Orthodox baptisms *are something in the eyes of God*. . . . It is not the renewing, metaphysically transforming thing that Orthodox Baptism is, but it is powerful enough that even Roman actors, mocking the Christian Mysteries, were often converted to Christ simply by enacting the ritual of baptism.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.