

An open response to Patrick Barnes

October 8, 2009

St Pelagia the Righteous

Dear Patrick,

It has been many years since we have corresponded, and now we return to the topic of ecumenism. I'm grateful for your reply, and the extreme care you put into formulating it. While it is written as a formal public document, please allow me to address you in the format of an open letter – not *ad hominem*, I hope, but intentionally *ad personam*.

An Imbalance

Heresy vs Hope. Heresy vs Truth. I think now we have arrived at “Podcast vs Treatise!” My initial contribution took the form of two informal podcasts, aiming at a broad and theologically untrained audience. Particularly in the first of my two installments, I responded during the course of one afternoon to the Confession of Faith Against Ecumenism, juxtaposing it briefly and simply with another very different text (and you are quite right, it was a rather unfair comparison). Your response is a 28-page treatise/manifesto that draws heavily on your own book-length study of these questions. You are answering a tennis volley with a canon blast – although by this metaphor I do not imply that your arguments are devastating: some hold water and others don't. A more apt image would be a book in response to a newspaper editorial: they are simply of a totally different character, with a different intended audience and scope.

(The Confession itself is something of a canon blast – it makes some disturbing, violent statements about non-Orthodox (e.g., calling all of European Protestantism “Pan-Heresy”), and in that context I found it curious to hear some of my own remarks, which called these excesses into question, being seen by some of my respondents as “provocative” and “inflammatory!”)

That said, your reply is an important piece of work, and its audience deserves to be reached as well. But even in its content, it is not actually a response to my podcasts, which addressed a specific document that you mention only once in your treatise. So we have two very different “texts” here, leaving me with the question of how to respond. And I should begin by saying that if you seek from me a thirty-page, a fifty- or hundred-page treatise that responds to your full satisfaction – for that is what would be necessary to introduce the complexity and nuance to provide a comprehensive response – you will be disappointed.

I will nonetheless attempt to respond to your main points as I see them, in the hope that I am doing some justice to the extraordinary care you have taken, and also to the validity and honesty of many of your arguments, even as I periodically identify problems in your logic or differences in our perception. I also am mindful that in another recent podcast I advocated that we all have to be accountable for our words. And in those cases where my words were careless or caused confusion, perhaps owing to the haste of my podcast preparations, I must accept responsibility and answer for this.

My chief aim here will be to take up your challenge to explain what I see (or rather what I believe the Church has always taught and practiced) as a de facto “middle ground” between the two extremes of ecclesiastical isolationism and ecclesiastical relativism. I will do this by speaking of baptism, economy, and largely through the work of Fr Florovsky – not because he has the last word on the subject, but because much of your reply is concerned with (a) disagreeing with my reading of his essay on the Limits of the Church, and (b) invoking St Hilarion Troitsky and others to disagree with what Florovsky actually says.

A second aim will be to clarify identities: for one, the identity and reality of ecumenical involvement, to which end I will say a few words from my experience of “ecumenism” on the ground. But also the identity of Peter Bouteneff and Patrick Barnes, respectively. Because in your reply you often seem to take me, and my podcasts, as representing the entire world of “Orthodox ecumenism” and everything that has been said in its name. You extrapolate comments I made about the harshest extremes of the Confession Against Ecumenism, or about the most extreme elements among the diverse anti-ecumenist camps, and apply them to yourself, in order to be able to say that I attacked you unfairly. The fact is, as you know very well, you are one of the less extreme, less zealot voices – you regularly introduce a nuance and care into your arguments that is often missing in the Confession and other similar texts. Indeed, I have observed that it is the zealots who sometimes seek to disown your positions as “too soft” – something which only emphasizes the broad range of anti-ecumenist voices, many of which are engaged in internecine battles. I thank God for your ministry in attempting to bring moderation and reason into a sometimes frenetic and unchurchly discourse.

So we have to avoid painting simplistic or monolithic pictures of ecumenists vs. antiecumenists. As you’ll be seeing in this letter, I will be distancing myself from some extremes of Orthodox ecumenism. I hope you will likewise continue to distance yourself from some of the extremes of anti-ecumenist literature – as you periodically do elsewhere.

Definitions

On that score, I greatly appreciate your frank admission early on that the Confession of Faith Against Ecumenism has certain flaws. I’m not claiming any victory here. Rather, I’m grateful for the few places where you finds it conceivable to say that there are points on which we actually *agree*. This is an important contribution to an honest and nuanced exchange. And I only wish you had gone further, to admit more places where the Confession goes awry.

Another major contribution is your seeking to define your terms, beginning with “ecumenism” and “ecumenist,” and moving on to “Grace.” Later on the definitions get a bit hazy in your usage, and I still question the value of over-quantifying “Grace.” But at least at the outset, your provide an invaluable (and sadly almost unique) clarity, that helps assure that people are actually speaking about the same thing, instead of hurling ideological salvos at each other. Because the fact remains that although you have taken the care to do so, the Confession does not, and neither do most of the extremist anti-ecumenist statements.

Having said that, I once again invite you to please desist from saying that I accuse all anti-ecumenists of simplistic hysteria, or of being unsophisticated or uneducated, and then defending yourself against those charges. At the same time, you might stop attributing to me the things that were said by other “ecumenists,” and defending yourself against them too. In short, you ought to be clear as to who is doing the talking. And more generally, you ought to

admit here, as you do throughout your remarkable web site, that there are a wide variety of anti-ecumenist groups, and a wide variety of anti-ecumenist literature, some of which is indeed lacking in nuance, and some that isn't. That is what I maintain with consistency in my two podcasts. Aside from never using the word "unsophisticated," I would never include you among the total extremists. Now, on to content.

Baptism, Florovsky, and the "middle ground"

Baptism is a hugely important issue in the "ecumenism" discussion. It is also one of the areas where the nuance for which I've just praised you begins to fray. For here is one of the places where you attribute to me and to my podcasts things that I have never asserted. I never used the words "baptismal ecclesiology," nor did I even speak of the "validity" of baptism outside the Orthodox Church, nor did I ever infer that we "share a common baptism" with the non-Orthodox.

You've been thorough in presenting many of the cases where Orthodox ecumenists have used language that implies something akin to a "Branch" ecclesiological relativism. There are instances where you cite them out of context, or read more into the text than is intended. The famous 1920 encyclical never says that churches are members of the same body (cf. p. 6). It speaks of non-Orthodox "churches," true, but only in respect of their own declared self-appellation.

At the same time, I have to say that there are "ecumenist" statements you cite that make me uncomfortable. Here is where I would identify a certain range among Orthodox ecumenists as well, and indicate where on that range I locate myself. I confess that I myself am dissatisfied, for example, with the language of the document "Baptism and 'Sacramental Economy'" that you quote on page 5. I don't believe Fr. Florovsky would be comfortable with it either, because it *implies*, at least, a total relativism of our baptisms and therefore of our churches. I am likewise extremely unhappy with the language of "two lungs," and even "sister churches," and would never agree to its dogmatic usage. That is why you have never heard me use this language to refer to the relationship of Orthodox to non-Orthodox, because if these metaphors are being spoken in their fully theological sense, they are misleading. As it is, I believe that most of the time (including in Bishop Maximos's essay) they are being invoked in another mode of speech.

Just last month, Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk spoke of the lack of Eucharistic communion between Orthodox and Catholic churches, and division generally, is "a sin that tears apart the body of the Church." Technically or dogmatically speaking, one could not say this. But speaking from the heart, one most certainly can. I know Bishop (now Metropolitan) Maximos, and I know Archbishop Hilarion; both men are uncompromising on the identity of the Orthodox Church as the One Holy Church of Jesus Christ, and neither holds to the ecclesiological relativism that is implied by the "two lung" metaphor. But they are also people who are sensitive to "Christian reality" (we have to struggle to find an appropriate vocabulary here) in the Roman Catholic Church, and I deeply respect them and agree with them for that sensitivity. Having said this, I believe that one should avoid using misleading metaphors at all costs, except in cases where their precise sense is clearly specified.

In short, there are times that the ecclesiological relativism you attribute to certain texts is a matter of one's unsympathetic reading, yet there are also points where such texts go further than I would like. However, I would stand by my assertion that the "Orthodox ecumenists," i.e.,

people like me who participate in inter-Christian dialogue, including through the various national councils and the World Council of Churches, *do not teach the “branch theory.”* And our participation in the ecumenical movement does not in itself constitute relativism. Rather, as Fr Seraphim Rose points out in one of the quotations I supply at the end of this reply, “[Orthodox ecumenists] only irritate the Protestants in the ecumenical movement by frequently stating at ecumenical gatherings that Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ.” I know this very well from experience.

Now here is where we get to the famous “middle ground” that I speak about in my podcasts, and that you call into question. Because while I do not believe that we share a “common baptism” with non-Orthodox, nor do I believe we are two lungs of one body, nor branches of one tree, I do—with reverence—assert that there is *Christian life* outside the Orthodox Church. This, to me, is a more fruitful point of discussion than the argument over whether there is “mysteriological Grace,” or some, or a little, or whatever, present outside the Orthodox Church. Having said that, I am strongly inclined to agree with Fr. Florovsky’s famous and crucial assertion that the charismatic borders of the Church are not the same as its canonical borders – an unequivocal assertion of “mysteriological Grace” outside of canonical Orthodoxy. You repeatedly say that Florovsky sides with St Cyprian’s theology, and of course this is so. But look at the paragraph that you yourself cite, and what it is actually saying. (Here I will add emphasis.)

St Cyprian started from the silent supposition that the canonical and charismatic limits of the Church invariably coincide, and *it is his unproven equation that has not been confirmed by the communal consciousness of the Church.*

Is he saying that the “Church consciousness” is wrong in going beyond St Cyprian? No. Because the above observation leads to his next point:

In her sacramental, mysterious being the Church surpasses all canonical norms. For that reason *a canonical cleavage does not immediately signify mystical impoverishment and desolation.* All that Cyprian said about the unity of the Church and the sacraments can be and must be accepted. *But it is not necessary to draw with him the final boundary around the body of the Church by means of canonical points alone.*

Florovsky remains appropriately apophatic in speaking of what these charismatic borders might look like, but his assertion that they may be larger than the canonical borders of the Church remains vital, and entirely supported by the practice of the Church through the centuries. The above is simply to clarify what Florovsky is saying, and his relationship to the teaching of St Cyprian of Carthage.

While I would not speak of a “common baptism” with non-Orthodox, I cannot but recognize that, say, a Roman Catholic Baptism, in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, is – and I am not dogmatic with my words, but rather *provisional*—at the very least something of a promise of entry into Christian life, if not more than that. That is different from saying it is an entry into the Body of Christ, in the same sense as baptism into the Orthodox Church. This is why Roman Catholics are commonly received into Orthodoxy by some kind of additional rite that indicates a *completion*, a sure joining into the Body as cannot have been dogmatically assured before. But baptized Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, persons who are living the faith of their respective fathers, have very clearly entered into a reality that sets them apart from the non-Christian sphere. In some cases this entry is borne out in a “Christian

life” that one would have to be obtuse not to perceive. This is why we have C.S. Lewis, von Balthasar, de Lubac, Mother Teresa, as persons who worship and serve the One God and Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. They are Christians. Yes, they are divided from us, and would that they were one with us. But they were baptized into *something*, and that something is not “pan-heresy,” as the Confession calls the “pseudo-churches of Western Europe.” Am I a “branch theorist” to say as much? Are you going to ask me how much Grace, and what kind of Grace do they possess? (I suppose one of my main objections to your approach, and that of many whom you cite, is the insistence on defining and quantifying Grace as if it were a currency.)

The “middle ground” between ecclesiological relativism on the one hand, and the complete absence of Christian life or charismatic grace outside Orthodoxy on the other hand, is testified to – yes – by the variety of practices of reception of non-Orthodox, throughout history and today, especially where we can demonstrate that this variety has clear theological basis, not merely historical precedent. (Here I take exception with the interpretation of St. Hilarion Troitsky, as I will say again below.)

St Basil the Great’s *Canonical Epistle* is frequently cited by all sides of this debate. What I see as its main relevance to our conversation is its explicit acknowledgement of a differentiation among the separated, something which you seem to deny has any real meaning (p. 5). As is well known, St Basil distinguishes “heresies, schisms, and illegal congregations.” We ought to note that the groups he cites as “heresies” bear almost no resemblance to Christianity: Manichaeans, Valentinians, and Montanists. The schisms—whose baptism he accepts, by the way—he says are “reconcilable” and, even more remarkably, “still of the Church (*eti ek tes ekklesias onton*).” Are we still denying different extents of separation?

Now, the big problem here, as with many dimensions of ancient canonical discipline—including the canons on “prayer with heretics”—is exactly how to apply these categories in our own context, and to the churches as we know them today. For the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Evangelicals, and Methodists of today, for example, are in vastly different relations with each other and with the Orthodox Church, and have undergone vastly different histories, than the groups St Basil would have encountered and categorized. I would have a hard time fitting them easily into any of his categories. (This is an example of what makes many of the 21 “questions” with which you close your treatise unanswerable in the form that you pose them.) But what we need to retain is St Basil’s understanding of differentiated separation and therefore different modes of reception, something to which he returns elsewhere in his written work (see e.g., Epistle 199.47).

As you frequently point out in your reply, even the Arians, who denied the divinity of the Son, were received after the second Ecumenical Council without rebaptism. Here you cite several important figures in the Church who said that the reception of converts (such as the Arians) without (re)-baptism is done according to “oikonomia.” By that term they mean the relaxing of canonical principles. But as Fr Florovsky, once again, reminds forcibly throughout his famous essay that we both keep citing, “oikonomia” does not (*can* not) create something out of nothing. There either was “something” in the non-Orthodox baptism or there was not. The answer he gives, which he attributes to St Augustine, is effectively to say that the baptism becomes effective upon entry into the Orthodox Church. Now, that can be made to sound scholastic, or transactional, or even bizarre. But can we not see a spiritual truth to it? Or better, an

eschatological truth? In that case, if baptism is efficacious retroactively, can we not identify, as part of that retroactive effectiveness, the elements of a life of faith in the God-Man Jesus Christ in the baptized Roman Catholic? We must continue to find language that makes sense of a reality that is consistently acknowledged throughout the Church's life, that speaks of baptism in terms, alternately, of Grace, of promise, of gift, of vocation, of entry. Florovsky is right to remain apophatic, in making statements about the "many bonds, still not broken, whereby the schisms are held together in a certain unity with the Church." But in all the apophaticism, he is saying something crucially important. Here is how he summarizes the points discussed in the above few paragraphs:

[T]he love of God can overcome the failure of love in man. In the sects themselves – and even among the heretics – the Church continues to perform her saving and sanctifying work. It may not follow, perhaps, that we should say that schismatics are still in the Church. In any case this would not be precise and sounds equivocal. It would be truer to say that the Church continues to work in the schisms in expectation of that mysterious hour when the stubborn heart will be melted in the warmth of God's prevenient grace, when the will and thirst for communality and unity will finally burst into flame. The 'validity' of sacraments among schismatics is the mysterious guarantee of their return to Catholic plenitude and unity.

The later pages of your reply come to lean heavily on one of your favorite authors, St. Hilarion Troitsky, an important figure in the early 20th century Russian Church and a Hieromartyr, who says that the diversity of practice in the reception of converts was without differentiating very rigorously between their respective dogmatic teachings (p. 12). This is supposed to trump Florovsky, but it is historically inaccurate. (A great saint's canonization does not confer inerrancy on his every word.) Service books to this day (such as the famous "Hapgood" book in use through so much of the English-speaking Orthodox Church in the 20th c.) stipulate different modes of reception precisely with respect to the different teachings and rites of the convert's origin. In doing so they are faithful to practices of the Church over the centuries – at least since the fourth.

What is ecumenism?

Much of your reply, together with other anti-ecumenical literature, emanates from a deep-seated discomfort with the whole idea (and not just the theology) of "ecumenism" – here meaning the institutionalized form of inter-Christian encounter. It's a kind of allergy, and I have to say that I both find it perfectly understandable, and don't expect to alter it in any significant way. What I can try to do is shed some perspective on the endeavor by writing from the experience of what I have seen actually happening within "ecumenical encounters." Some of that, I willingly admit, is worthy of allergic reaction, and I have felt it myself. Some of it is just plain boring, bland, or stupid. But all in all, I think that the spiritual or theological danger of ecumenical encounters is grossly exaggerated.

As I've done this kind of thing before, I will draw on some things I've written in the past, where I've pointed out several pitfalls which need to be avoided when assessing ecumenism and Orthodox participation in it. You, Patrick, do not make all of these distorted assumptions, but the people whom you call upon to support your arguments often do.

One mistake is to treat ecumenism generally, and the WCC in specific, as a monolithic and undifferentiated phenomenon. As opponents of any movement or trend are apt to do, opponents of “ecumenism” often isolate and combine certain unrepresentative events and statements to paint a cataclysmic portrait of the WCC or of what they call ecumenism. For example, thanks to videotapes and YouTube, two events which occurred at the WCC’s General Assembly at Canberra in 1991 have come in the minds of some people to represent everything that the WCC stands for and does. One was the opening prayer service of that Assembly, where Assembly participants walked through incense to enter the place of worship, and where they saw Aboriginal members of the Anglican Church dancing and playing traditional instruments on the stage. (A separate essay could be written about both the problems and the non-problems of this event.) The other episode was a presentation at a plenary session of the Assembly, where a Korean feminist theologian invoked the spirits of “earth, air, water and sea creatures.”

These happenings do indeed require measures of explanation and/or protest — and in fact they justly received harsh criticism from the Orthodox participants of the Assembly, as documented by the minutes. But they have been telescoped in such a way as to suggest that this kind of thing is all the WCC ever does. Which is why some people (though not you, to my knowledge) say that ecumenical institutions are run by “neo-Pagans.”

Another mistake is to judge the events and statements emanating from the ecumenical movement or from WCC officials as if they had authority, whether doctrinal or ecclesiastical, over the Orthodox Church or over anybody. If it were true that anything written in a WCC message or anything said by a WCC official had binding authority on the member churches then the Orthodox would have withdrawn long ago or never would have joined. Indeed, much is said and done in the WCC that runs counter to Orthodox doctrine and ethos — which, some would argue, is why we have to be there. On this score, I am glad that St Mark of Ephesus was present at the Council in Florence-Ferrara, in order to witness to the errors in the deeply problematic agreement that others were prepared to endorse.

A further mistake within Orthodox discussion on the ecumenical question is to approach statements and texts produced through ecumenical processes with unreasonable expectations. Very often people expect everything coming from an inter-Christian forum to sound as if it emanated from an Orthodox synod or an Orthodox dogmatics text. A certain amount of realism is necessary when considering, for one, that the documents emerging from ecumenical encounters are the product of a great variety of processes, and they have an equally great variety of intended uses, and of course, none of them carry any authority whatsoever over the churches themselves. So here, as with all texts, the reader is responsible for applying the appropriate mode of interpretation: is this intended as a doctrinal statement, a policy document for my church or a proposal for discussion? Is this a speech by one individual, the product of a meeting of ten people, or the process of ten years of conferences and church responses?

In addition to asking such questions, it must be borne in mind that the persons in dialogue with the Orthodox have generally come from generations of Protestantism, Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism, and whether or not their views are mistaken on a given subject, they are often as convinced of them as we are convinced of ours. Their views are not apt to change quickly. Nor is the view of many Protestants in the ecumenical movement that “The One Church” is in fact best described by branches of one tree.

The realism I'm calling for above does not exonerate us from the responsibility of reviewing ecumenical texts with great care and with the intent of correcting them in a constructive fashion. It also places on us the responsibility to explain what we are doing, to the faithful of our Church, so that they would not be scandalized. Would that there were more Orthodox who are ready and willing for these tasks! And would that the anti-ecumenical extremists cease from fanning flames of scandal among our faithful, because if you ask me, they are doing far more to scandalize and divide than those of us who participate in ecumenical meetings.

conclusions

There are many other points raised in your reply that I never mentioned in my podcast and that have no connection to the Confession of Faith Against Ecumenism to which I was chiefly reacting; it is not my responsibility to address them here. I have nonetheless tried to address, sometimes more and sometimes less thoroughly, most of the points you summarize on p. 25, and even some of the challenges you pose on pp. 26-27 – at least those which are answerable in less than 8,000 words, if they are answerable at all.

I would like, for my part, pose you the following questions, by citing the Confession Against Ecumenism:

- Do you believe that Lutherans, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics (=Protestantism and Papism) in Western Europe are correctly referred to by the common name of "Ecumenism" or "Pan-Heresy"?
- Do you believe that Roman Catholics (aka Papism) have accepted the pan-heresy of ecumenism, which adopts and legalizes all heresies as "churches?" Have you read the encyclical *Dominus Iesus*, or the more recent Vatican document, "Response to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," which refutes anything approaching such a claim?
- Do you affirm that "the Papists" have forfeited the presence of the Holy Spirit?
- Do you believe that "Papists" suffer from dogmatic minimalism? (For my part, I thought that if anything they suffer from dogmatic *maximalism*.)

Patrick, my point here is to urge the more moderate anti-ecumenists such as yourself to own up to the fact that there is much that is said in the name of anti-ecumenism that is wrong and/or under-nuanced. And even harmful. You've begun, very cautiously, to do so, just as I have here owned up to my discomfort with some of the things said in ecumenical contexts. We have to be honest. And to this end it might help to continue this conversation outside of the full public view – something I'd be glad to do.

A last, related urging, to re-emphasize what I said earlier: when talking with me, you do not have to answer to every insult ever leveled by an ecumenist against a zealot. For my part, I could have wasted much time trying to defend myself against every bizarre accusation or name-calling I've received at the hands of extremists. If you do want to continue this conversation, in short, I urge you to have it as a conversation with *me*.

Yours in Christ,
Peter Bouteneff

Postscript: A few quotations for mutual reflection

Someone who has actually tasted truth is not contentious for truth. Someone who is considered by people to be zealous for truth has not yet learnt what truth is really like; once he has truly learnt it, he will cease from zealousness on its behalf.

-- St. Isaac the Syrian, Kephalaia 4.77.

I think then that the one great goal of all who are really and truly serving the Lord ought to be to bring back to union the churches who have at different times and in different ways divided from one another. In attempting myself to effect this, I cannot fairly be blamed for wasting my time, for nothing is so characteristically Christian as being a peacemaker, and for this reason our Lord has promised us peacemakers a very high reward.

-- St Basil the Great, Epistle 94, reconciling the repenting Arian churches

When the hand draws up a quantity of water, there is separated from it, not only the residue which is left behind, but also those drops which trickle out through the fingers; so also there is a separation between us and, not only those who are aloof in their impiety, but also those who are most pious, both in regard to such doctrines as are of small consequence and also in regard to expressions intended to bear the same meaning.

-- St Gregory the Theologian, Oration 21.35

Some would-be zealots of Orthodoxy use the term [ecumenism] in entirely too imprecise a fashion, as though the very use of the term or contact with an 'ecumenical' organization is itself a 'heresy.' Such views are clearly exaggerations. 'Ecumenism' is a heresy only if it actually involves the denial that Orthodoxy is the true Church of Christ. A few of the Orthodox leaders of the ecumenical movement have gone this far; but most Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement have not said this much; and a few (such as the late Fr. Georges Florovsky) have only irritated the Protestants in the ecumenical movement by frequently stating at ecumenical gatherings that Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ. One must certainly criticize the participation of even these latter persons in the ecumenical movement, which at its best is misleading and vague about the nature of Christ's Church; but one cannot call such people 'heretics,' nor can one affirm that any but a few Orthodox representatives have actually taught ecumenism as a heresy. The battle for true Orthodoxy in our times is not aided by such exaggerations.

The excessive reaction against the ecumenical movement has the same worldly spirit that is present in the ecumenical movement itself.

-- Fr. Seraphim Rose, (*Life and Works*, p. 997).

Ecumenism strikes terror in the hearts of those who think of the Orthodox Church as a fragile flower, rather than the basis of the Universe.

-- Bishop Tikhon of San Francisco (retired)