

THE RECEPTION OF CONVERTS

Reflections on a Letter by Elder Maximos

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Elder Maximos is Superior of the Skete of St. Basil on Mt. Athos. Dedicated to the spirit of moderate traditionalism and persecuted for its fidelity to the Orthodox Faith, the skete is under the *omophorion* of Metropolitan Cyprian and our Holy Synod. It was at this historic skete, founded over three centuries ago by monks from Cappadocia, that St. Paisios Velichkovsky found many of the Patristic texts for which he had so diligently searched after arriving on the Holy Mountain. It was also at St. Basil's, which is attached to the Great Lavra, that the *kollyvades* movement was launched. Father Maximos, who has resided on Mt. Athos for almost sixty years, helped restore the skete, which had fallen into disrepair, several decades ago.

I recently came across the text of a penetrating letter on the nature of Baptism and the reception of converts into the Orthodox Church, written by Father Maximos in his inimitably complex and eloquent literary Greek. I subsequently spoke with him at length about this letter, which had been solicited by a professor of theology at the University of Vienna for use in his forthcoming book on the subject of Baptism in general. It struck me that the essence of the letter provides superb guidance for Orthodox here in America, where the subject of the reception of converts into Orthodoxy has been clouded by misunderstanding; by an intentional distortion of traditional Ortho-

This article appeared in an earlier issue of *Orthodox Tradition* (Volume IV, No. 1) and was well received by readers. Following a number of requests that we reprint it, the article is presented here in its original form, though with some minor addenda. Given the unfortunate proliferation of incorrect information about the proper reception of the heterodox into Orthodoxy, especially in America and Western Europe, we feel that His Eminence's commentary on the Elder Maximos' words are particularly timely.

dox teaching; by inadequate and simplistic scholarship which fails to grasp the true significance of the interplay between “economy” and “canonical exactitude” in receiving converts into the Church (see, for example, a very misleading and inchoate article on this interplay by John Erickson in *Diakonia* (Vol. XIX, Nos. 1-3); and by those who have abandoned zeal for the Orthodox Faith in their unwise and compromising zeal for the spirit of extremist ecumenism.

Father Maximos begins his discourse by pointing out that in the matter of Baptism we must return to the universal witness of the Church as that witness is contained in its historical practice: in the exactitude of practice untouched by economy. We must return to the practice of the Apostles and the dictates of the Canons of the Church (which are not human formulae, but expressions of divine truths, of the dogmas of the Church), in which triple immersion in water in the name of the Holy Trinity, in accordance with Scriptural prescriptions, is the standard. This Baptism, sanctified by Christ Himself, contains within it the power of Christianity, capturing even in its external form a mystical power. It is this Baptism, inseparable from the power of the Church and the validity of the Orthodox Priesthood through which it is administered, that is the standard for receiving all of those baptized outside the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Every act of economy in receiving those baptized outside Orthodoxy must rest on this indisputable standard of the Orthodox Church. Every historical deviation from this standard stands in contrast to its witness throughout the greater part of the Orthodox Church's history. If we do not reject economy—reception by Chrismation and even Confession—, it is only because we know that the exception has been carefully and prudently weighed against the standard. Without such a process, in which we exalt and show preference for the standard, true economy does not exist. Indeed, without a primary respect for the universal practice of the Church, exceptions cannot rightly exist.

It strikes me that most of the modernist jurisdictions in America, some—like the OCA—made up largely of former Greek Catholics and Faithful converted here in America from the Latin Church and Protestantism, have wavered from the standard which Father Maximos places before us, possibly because they are more sensitive to the question of Baptism outside Orthodoxy than exclusively Orthodox populations. (And this is offered as an observation, not a criticism. We are attempting to bring wrong practice into perspective, not to condemn those who might have unwittingly fallen to it.) It seems

that economy, or the reception of converts by Chrismation, has become the standard, while the exception has become Baptism, the actual standard. I am sure that statistics would bear me out on this claim. As a result, great confusion has entered into the Church.

Many believe, today, that converts need not be received into the Church by Baptism because their former Baptisms were “valid” and are “accepted” by the Orthodox Church. This is particularly true in jurisdictions, again like the OCA, where past “economy” with regard to receiving Greek Catholics, being taken out of historical context, has become distorted and misunderstood. In view of unusual historical circumstances, and based on a desire to end the tragic Uniate movement, the Russian Church, especially, has a history of leniency in receiving Greek Catholics. But never did such reception entail anything but a filling of the empty vessel of Uniate Baptism, economy taken even to the extreme of receiving Uniates who may have even been Baptized by so-called “sprinkling.” (It should be noted that in other historical circumstances, the Russian Church accepted converts from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism only by Baptism.) An emphasis on the periods of leniency in receiving Uniates, who shared a common history with their Orthodox brothers, has distorted the fact that there is but one standard and *one* Baptism: the Trinitarian Baptism of a convert by three-fold immersion in the bosom of the Orthodox Church.

The spirit of laxity in receiving converts in America is also related to the excesses of ecumenism. As Father Maximos points out in his letter on Baptism, there is but one Church: the Orthodox Church. There is but one Baptism: that performed in an Orthodox Church according to the Trinitarian formula. While we do not judge or condemn those outside Orthodoxy—for this is the prerogative only of God—, we know only one valid Christianity, verified by Apostolic Succession and adherence to the Holy Canons, which express a living Faith, that of Holy Orthodoxy. These views underlie the Orthodox desire always to adhere to the standard, except in unusual circumstances. They also stand in diametrical opposition to the tenets of ecumenism, which teaches that all religions have an element of the truth and that no single Church is the very criterion of truth. The ecumenist spirit of our age holds the idea of the primacy of Orthodoxy in contempt. And many Orthodox, caught up in this spirit, tend to believe that when the Church, because of extenuating circumstances, creates Grace in the empty form of non-Orthodox baptism, it somehow recognizes that “little bit of truth” in every religion.

This is simply not true. But more dangerous than this assumption is the corollary assumption in ecumenical circles: that there is no one repository of truth. Those converted in such circumstances are defeated in their attempts to grasp Orthodoxy, even before they begin. They fail at knowing the True Church.

Contemporary theologians, too, with their attention to the ecumenical movement and its tenets and their inadequate footing in the Fathers, often distort the canonical and Patristic texts relating to the use of economy, so as to suggest that the modern abuse of the standard of receiving converts by Baptism is somehow rooted in Orthodox practice. They say this both because they are often separated, in their modernism, from traditional practice (a separation sometimes expressed in their insecurity about being incorrectly received into Orthodoxy themselves), and because they use the standards of a minority Orthodox population, that of America, to judge the nature of that practice. If they are converts or American-born ethnics with little exposure to traditional Orthodoxy outside of this country, they are further given to misunderstanding correct Orthodox teaching. Father Maximos' trenchant statements about the first canon of St. Basil, which is the text *par excellence* in understanding the Patristic notion of economy and pastoral need, give us a vivid picture of how the Fathers worked always in the spirit of balancing "exactitude" (which can also be harmful to salvation when misapplied, according to this great Cappadocian Father) against human opinion. Contemporary discussions of this canon almost always focus on personal opinion, over and above the general practice of the Church, and work constantly toward the ecumenical compromise which we have cited. (An excellent discussion of the distortion of St. Basil's teachings and of economy in general can be found in the Reverend Michael Azkoul's "*Oikonomia and the Orthodox Church*," *The Patristic and Byzantine Review*, VI, 1 [1987], p. 65. In contrast to his often extreme views, Father Azkoul shows a sobriety in this particular article which is exemplary. See also my article on this subject in a later issue of the same journal, VI, 2 [1987].)

Father Maximos' concentration on the consistent practice of the Orthodox Church in receiving converts brings up the important question of how it is that we Orthodox in America understand economy. Against the standard of Baptism, we cannot deny the existence of extenuating circumstances when leniency must be used: in receiving those who, like the Uniates, have lived a liturgical life identical in form to that of Orthodoxy; in receiving cripples and those who sim-

ply cannot be placed in the Baptismal Font; perhaps in receiving the Non-Chalcedonian heretics; and in receiving from heresy those who were originally Baptized within the Church. But are these the criteria that are being used in the exercise of economy in America today? Hardly. Let me cite but one of many, many cases that we have encountered here in America. A young man came to our monastery. He had converted to Orthodoxy from Catholicism. When he entered the Orthodox Church (the OCA, in fact), he was told by the Priest who received him, a convert himself, that the Orthodox Church recognized the Baptisms of the Latins and that the young man was not abandoning his former Church (especially since Catholics, since Vatican II, “recognize the validity of Orthodox ordinations and Mysteries”), but simply following the style of another Rite in the Church. In reading the Fathers, the young man came to believe that he had not really converted to Orthodoxy and only subsequent to his actual Baptism did he learn what Orthodox truly believe—the legitimacy of Baptisms outside Her bosom not being part of those beliefs.

How can one justify the exercise of economy in receiving into the Church someone who does not really know that he is *changing his religion* and who is told that he is justified in doing so because of the dictates of Vatican II? Since when do we Orthodox base our legitimacy on a Church which our own Church has declared heretical in a number of local Councils? Such things are incredible! At this man's request and with the permission of the Holy Synod, I received him into Orthodoxy by Baptism. By its very nature, his reception into Orthodoxy was questionable. By contrast, as the Holy Canons dictate, I saw that he was catechized and that he knew what he was joining: the very Body of Christ and the Bosom of Holy Orthodoxy. I was flatly condemned by others for not believing in the Church's teaching regarding economy, which teaching I nonetheless correctly understand and embrace but which modernist detractors have abused and misused. I was accused of Baptizing someone who had communed. The issue for *me* was the giving of Holy Communion to this man under circumstances that called his Baptism into question. (The fact that the Priest who initially received the young man eventually left the Orthodox Church is worthy of note.) Indeed, many modernists are shocked when they go to Mt. Athos and find that some of the moderate traditionalists—not the extremist zealots to whom those who wish to justify their errors would point—do not accept into communion those Orthodox who have been received into the Church by economy, without there having been extenuating circum-

stances for such. The more sober Athonite Fathers quite rightly find such receptions questionable and strongly suggest that individuals wrongly received be conditionally Baptized.

Indeed, as I reflect on Father Maximos' citation of Father after Father and Council after Council which favor adherence to the standard of receiving converts into Orthodoxy by Baptism, I must reflect on just how sober our American Orthodox Churches are. In an age of ecclesiastical relativity, when the Orthodox Church's claim to primacy is being challenged by the tyranny of relativistic absolutists, what can possibly be accomplished by exercising economy in receiving converts? Does this not serve the aims of the ecumenists and suggest that all Churches are equal? Does it not jeopardize the spiritual lives of those who are converted to the criterion and standard of Orthodoxy, yet are tempted to think that they might gain salvation outside of Orthodoxy? I must wonder whether the Apostolic injunction to go out and Baptize the world is really fulfilled when we are more busy trying to prove that Orthodoxy is an accommodating religion—thus abusing the real theory of economy—than attempting with good intention and full dedication to fulfill every *iota* of the Faith. When we bring converts into the Church by the back door and in an atmosphere of doubt, are we truly fulfilling our duties? I for one would rather adhere to the standard than to have such a thing on my conscience. I would rather follow the guidance of such experienced pastors as Father Maximos, whose firm, but moderate, traditionalism has made him a man of spirit to emulate.

Naturally, all of the foregoing does not mean that we should create a great upheaval in the Church by denying the Church's past acts of economy in properly receiving into Orthodoxy, by Chrismation, those who fully understood the nature of the Church's actions and who were received under the practices set forth by the higher Church authority. As we have noted, though reception by Baptism is the general practice of the Church historically, during certain periods other practices have been allowed in receiving converts. What we must do is avoid historical relativism and look very seriously at how the notion of economy is being abused today. We must set a new policy, in this age of theological sophistry and ecumenical confusion, which reflects the needs of our time. We must be moderate as we insist on a return to Holy Tradition and the most conservative practices of Orthodoxy—an absolute necessity in days of ambiguity in the spiritual life—, yet uncompromising in the face of that which is foreign to the true ethos of our Faith.