

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)

IV. Culpability, Sincerity, and Victimization

Despite what we have said concerning Western Christianity, there will still be those who object to the *ramifications*, arguing that the overwhelming majority of Western heterodox are not conscious, willful heretics—being, for the most part, innocently ignorant of Orthodoxy or mere “*victims*” of heresy and historical circumstance—, thus rendering inapplicable the Sacred Canons concerning heretics.

Roman Catholic writers employ the terms “formal heresy”—*i.e.*, consciously and obstinately held—and “material heresy”—*i.e.*, unknowingly held—to reflect a pastoral sensitivity to the concept of “degrees of responsibility.” Though Orthodox writers do not often use these exact terms, the distinction is legitimate and can be drawn from Holy Tradition. Saint Cyprian writes:

For one who errs by simplicity may be pardoned, as the blessed Apostle Paul says of himself, “I who at first was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; yet obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly” [1 Tim. 1:13]. But after inspiration and revelation made to him, he who intelligently and knowingly perseveres in that course in which he had erred, sins without pardon for his ignorance. For he resists with a certain presumption and obstinacy, when he is overcome by reason.⁵²

It is indeed true that many Western Christians are mere victims of heresy, in blissful ignorance of Orthodoxy and therefore not formal heretics. Were some of these same people to be given the opportunity to encounter Orthodoxy, they would undoubtedly convert. Of these tenderhearted ones that only God knows, one might borrow the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian and say, “Even before [they were] of our fold they were ours.”⁵³

The author personally knows many pious heterodox followers of Christ. Moreover, his experience as a former Protestant was spiritually positive in numerous ways. In a very real sense it prepared the way for him to embrace the fullness of Christianity, for many good and true things were taught to him during that period, and a relationship with God was cultivated. Father Seraphim (Rose) of Platina, himself a convert to Orthodoxy from Protestantism, often observed admirable Christian faith in Protestants. In

⁵² *Epistle LXXII*, “To Jubaianus,” Ch. 13. Cf. the words of Christ concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—Who is the Spirit of Truth—in St. Matthew 12:1-32.

⁵³ See Chapter Six.

speaking about a sect that was located near the Saint Herman Brotherhood in Platina, he wrote:

These Protestants have a simple and warm Christian faith without much of the sectarian narrowness that characterizes many Protestant groups. They don't believe, like some Protestants, that they are "saved" and don't need to do any more; they believe in the idea of spiritual struggle and training the soul. They force themselves to forgive each other and not to hold grudges. They take in bums and hippies off the streets and have a special farm for rehabilitating them and teaching them a sense of responsibility. In other words, they take Christianity seriously as the most important thing in life; it's not the fullness of Christianity that we Orthodox have, but it's good as far as it goes, and these people are warm, loving people who obviously love Christ. In this way they are an example of what we should be, only more so. *Whether they attain salvation by their practice of Christianity is for God to judge*, for some of their views and actions are far from the true Christianity of Orthodoxy handed down to us from Christ and His Apostles; but at least an awareness of their existence should help us to be aware of what we already have.⁵⁴

The aforementioned Metropolitan Philaret expressed similar views:

It is self-evident... that sincere Christians who are Roman Catholics, or Lutherans, or members of other non-Orthodox confessions, cannot be termed renegades or heretics—i.e. those who *knowingly* pervert the truth. . . . They have been born and raised and are living according to the creed which they have inherited, just as do the majority of you who are Orthodox; in their lives there has not been a moment of *personal and conscious renunciation of Orthodoxy*. The Lord, "Who will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) and "Who enlightens every man born into the world" (John 1:9), undoubtedly is leading them also towards salvation in His own way.⁵⁵

In short, it is certainly appropriate to concede that many, if not most, Western Christians are not conscious, willful heretics.

Ultimately, however, none of this has any bearing on the applicability of the Sacred Canons concerning the reception of schismatics and heretics. Such arguments are

⁵⁴ *The Orthodox Word*, Sept.-Oct., 1980 (94), p. 218, emphasis ours. Cf. his remarks in *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*:

But what is it that those outside the Church of Christ are capable of teaching Orthodox Christians? It is certainly true (no conscious Orthodox person will deny it) that Orthodox Christians are sometimes put to shame by the fervor and zeal of some Roman Catholics and Protestants for church attendance, missionary activities, praying together, reading the Scripture, and the like. Fervent non-Orthodox persons can shame the Orthodox, even in the error of their beliefs, when they make more effort to please God than many Orthodox people do while possessing the whole fullness of apostolic Christianity. The Orthodox would do well to learn from them and wake up to the spiritual riches in their own Church which they fail to see out of spiritual sloth or bad habits. All this relates to the *human* side of faith, to the human efforts which can be expended in religious activities whether one's belief is right or wrong. (*Op. cit.*, p. 122)

⁵⁵ From the pamphlet "Will the Heterodox Be Saved?" (leaflet #L213) published by the St. John of Kronstadt Press.

irrelevant to the question of the *ecclesial* status of heterodox Christians. As we shall see in the next chapter, the Holy Canons concerning heterodox baptism and reception into the Church make no distinction between formal and material heretics. Distinctions among heterodox *groups* are made—for instance Saint Basil’s First Canon and Canon 95 of the Sixth Œcumene Synod—but not between “leaders” and “simple ignorant followers.” Though surely the leaders of the Donatist and Novationist sects—towards which these Canons were directed—were more culpable or “formal” in their heterodox stance, the great mass of the people under their care were in all likelihood mere victims. By the seventh century, there were many generations of people who were simply born into the errors created by the original leaders of these sects, innocently holding to their errors and in all sincerity believing that they were right-believing Christians. Nevertheless, no distinction is made between leaders and victims. The guidelines for the reception of innocent laypeople are no different than for more responsible and culpable clergy.

Conclusion

There is no such thing as an inverse relationship between culpability or sincerity and the validity of heterodox sacraments. The distinction between formal and material heretic is helpful, but ultimately it is of consequence only for the sons and daughters of the Church who fall into error. For those who have never been Orthodox and hold to heterodox beliefs—whether “formally” or “materially”—the ramifications are the same: they are separated from the Church. The extent of a person’s participation in the heresies of the confessional bodies in which he or she is a member is a “downstream” issue that is ultimately irrelevant as far as *ecclesial* status is concerned. Correspondingly, the varying “degrees of Orthodoxy” of a particular heterodox group are—on an ontological level—of no consequence.

Where the issue of “victimization” and guilt *may* be applicable is in the question of *eternal* status. As we have already shown, and will have an opportunity to demonstrate further, the question of a heterodox believer’s eternal destiny should be left open. In other words, the ecclesial and eternal implications of Orthodox ecclesiology—the two aspects of the “status” to which Bishop Kallistos refers in the “burning question”—should be kept separate.