



## We Believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: The Church's Holiness

In the last issue of the *Voice of Orthodoxy* we reflected upon the unity and oneness of the Church. In this issue, the second attribute of the Church found in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed will be briefly examined.

### The Holy Church

The second attribute of the Church, as we find it in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, makes reference to the Church's holiness. Can we claim that the Church is holy? For many, this might be difficult to perceive or to accept because of the fact that even a cursory study of the history of the Church throughout the centuries—but also today as well—brings to light considerable misadventures and even scandals within the life of the Church, which are totally unrelated to holiness. For this reason, one is quite justified in asking to what extent the Church can indeed continue to claim that it is holy. Without wanting, in any way, to undervalue the reality of appreciable shortcomings in its life throughout time, the Church quite simply continues to claim to be holy only because of its conviction that God alone is holy and has gifted his holiness to the Church in which He is present. Before however turning our attention to reflecting briefly on the holiness of the Church, it is necessary to gain a sense of what is meant when we refer to God as holy as this will shed light on what is meant by the holiness of the Church.

There are ample references in the Scriptures which affirm God's holiness. The Scriptural understanding of 'holiness' with reference to God implies the One who is totally 'other' or set apart from created reality and unwavering in his commitment to do good. Already in the book of Exodus, we find the following: "Who is like you, o Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders" (Ex 15:11). And in 1 Sam 2:2: "There is no holy one like the Lord." And of course, in the book of Isaiah, the prophet writes: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3). Moreover, at every celebration of the Eucharist, in reply to the priest who says, "the holy gifts for the holy ones" the people sing: "One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen." These few

examples clearly show this aspect of the meaning of holiness which is connected with a sense of separation from all that is earthly and human. In referring to God as 'holy' we are affirming his heavenly uniqueness and incomparable magnificence. As we shall soon see, however, the 'holiness' of the Church is as much an attestation of this unprecedented and divine gift of God's self-presence within the *Ekklesia*, as it is a call for human beings to separate themselves from sin and strive to become members of God's kingdom.

The Orthodox Church teaches that, being the presence of God within the world, the Church communicates this holiness to its faithful. In this way it provides the opportunity for its members to participate in the holiness of God. The Church is understood to be holy because of God who has taken the initiative to bestow his *Ekklesia* with holy and heavenly gifts, some of which include: his Word<sup>1</sup>, the different sacraments<sup>2</sup> especially the Eucharist<sup>3</sup> and concrete structures and ministries<sup>4</sup> established to maintain the Church's integrity and identity throughout the ages with that of the apostolic Church. In this way, whilst God alone is holy, the

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1. James 1:21: "Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." 1Pet. 1:23: "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God."

2. John 3:5: "Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." 1Cor. 6:11: "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." James 5:14-15: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."

3. 1Cor. 11:27: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord."

4. 2Cor. 5:18: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." Eph. 4:11-12: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

faithful are enabled to participate in the holiness of God through these gifts of grace.

This participatory understanding of holiness is well attested in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, for example, Israel was said to be holy because of its association with God. More specifically, in the book of Leviticus, for example, we read: “For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44). Furthermore, it is in this sense that the New Testament refers to Christ’s disciples as God’s holy temple (cf. 1Cor 3:17), a “holy priesthood [βασιλειον ἱεράτευμα]” and a “holy nation [ἔθνος ἅγιον]” (1Pt 2:5 & 9), namely to the extent that they remain in the presence of God by endeavoring to participate and to live by God’s commandments. Writing to the different local Churches, St Paul also underlined that the faithful were “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy” (1Cor 1:2), “sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16). St Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 313 - 386AD) also wrote: “He [namely, God] is holy by nature, in contrast to human persons, who are not holy by nature, but by participation, struggle and prayer.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the Church’s claim to holiness is not contingent upon its members but rather to the initiative of God who has gifted it with divine holiness. As a gift, the Church can justifiably be referred to as a sacred [or holy] temple in the Lord (cf. Eph 2:21) and indeed, one verse later “the ‘dwelling place of God in the Spirit’” (Eph 2:22).

Having affirmed the holiness of the Church as a necessary consequence of its association with Jesus Christ and the Spirit, we must now turn our attention briefly to consider the Church’s historical reality and existence as lived out by its members, which has more often than not been less than holy. What the Scriptures make particularly clear is that God’s gift of holiness to the Church had to be appropriated, embraced and lived out by the faithful as well. In this sense, holiness—as indeed the other attributes of the Church—was understood to be a goal towards which the faithful had to strive. Understood from this perspective, the holiness of the Church is, in the end, an eschatological reality, to the extent that the faithful within the Church will always need to strive in order to make this gift a reality in their lives as well.

And so, it follows that the key to understanding properly the Church’s ‘holiness’ is to see it both as a gift and a goal at the same time; a given, yet simultaneously a demand whose fulfilment will only ever be perfectly realized in God’s eschatological kingdom. Archbishop Stylianos writes quite plainly

that the Church’s shortcomings throughout history “should not scandalize us in any way, because in many respects this is due to the finite nature of the human person, who does not cease to remain under the threat of sin and the burden of sinfulness even within the sacred space of the Church.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, the holiness of the Church in no way implies the sinlessness of its members. Quite the contrary, the Church is indeed made up of sinful people in need of Christ’s redemption and in need of repentance. Indeed, very often the Church is thought of as a hospital for those in need of healing. Often many are reticent to refer to the Church as ‘holy’ because, remaining on the level of the empirical, they identify the Church solely with its human element which does indeed fall short and sin.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the Church remains holy in its essential nature because of God’s gift of holiness to it. Only to the extent that God is thought to be the source and cause of the holiness and not human ability, can the Church be referred to as holy.

This characteristic feature of God’s gift and call for ‘holiness’ to the Church serves not only to heal the members of the Church but also to remind them of their ultimate mandate to holiness. Furthermore, as a gift of grace, reference to the Church’s holiness is a statement alluding to the Church’s ability, in light of God’s holiness, to heal the sinner and to make available the means for its followers to embark upon a life towards holiness. It is not a reference to the actual state of its members—indeed, the Church is more than the community of its members. This is beautifully expressed in a prayer on Pentecost, in which the faithful pray: “In You only do we sin, but You only do we worship.” Indeed, the greater the sin, the greater the need to be reminded of God’s call to holiness and the need of God’s grace. And so, these words ought to be seen as a most noble confession of human relativity in need of God’s holiness gifted to the world in the Church. From all the above it becomes clear that the mark of holiness serves equally as a gift and a call for faithful to be reconciled to the Church.

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6. Stylianos Harkianakis, *The Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology*, trans. Philip Kariatlis, (Adelaide, Sydney: ATF Press, St Andrew’s Press, 2008). 46.

7. Reflecting on the human failings within the Church, Bouteneff has written: If we in the Church are to be honest when we look at ourselves as a body of Christians, and look at our histories and our attitudes towards each other, to the world, and to God - all of which miss the mark - it is in some sense quite realistic and true to speak of “the sins of the Church”, provided we qualify what it is we are saying: the members of the Church have sinned, and do sin, personally and corporately.” Peter Bouteneff, ‘Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Ecumenical Movement’ in *Beyond the East-West Divide*, ed. Anna Marie Aagaard and Peter Bouteneff (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 28.

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5. St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystical Catechism*, 5,19. PG 33, 1124.