

Patristic Reflections on Orthodox Territoriality

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I want to begin with a quotation from St Maximos the Confessor's *Mystagogia*.

It is in this way that the holy Church of God will be shown to be active among us in the same way as God, as an image reflects its archetype. For many and of nearly boundless number are the men, women and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance, by race and language, by way of life and age, by opinions and skills, by manners and customs, by pursuits and studies, and still again by reputation, fortune, characteristics and habits: all are born into the Church and through it are reborn and recreated in the Spirit. To all in equal measures it gives and bestows one divine form and designation: to be Christ's and to bear his name. In accordance with faith it gives to all a single, simple, whole and indivisible condition which does not allow us to bring to mind the existence of the myriads of differences among them, even if they do exist, through the universal relationship and union of all things with it. It is through it that absolutely no one at all is in himself separated from the community since everyone converges with all the rest and joins together with them by the one, simple, and indivisible grace and power of faith. 'For all,' it is said, 'had but one heart and one mind.' [Acts 4:32] Thus to be and to appear as one

body formed of different members is really worthy of Christ himself, our true head, in whom says the divine Apostle, ‘there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, neither barbarian nor Scythian, neither slave nor free, but he is all and in all.’ [Col. 3:11] It is he who encloses in himself all beings by the unique, simple and infinitely wise power of his goodness.¹

St Maximos wrote the above text in the seventh century, when the notion of *symphonia* between Church and state, or, more strictly speaking, between Emperor and priesthood, had been long established. This was at a time, it should be noted, when the notion of the Christian Roman Empire was about to experience a profound blow from which it never recovered, for Maximos was writing on the eve of the loss of the Eastern and Southern provinces to Islam, a loss which reduced to nearly nothing the ‘worldwide’ or ‘œcumenical’ pretensions of the Roman/Byzantine Empire. But, the context of Maximos’ quote aside, my goal here is to draw attention to the concept of the Church Maximos is adumbrating. The Church is a body of people, united in the fact that they have “the one divine form and designation: to be Christ’s and to bear his name.” And, significantly, there is no mention of territory in Maximos’ summary. I recall that, some years ago, when I was researching the circle of St. Maximos, I noticed that the Cypriot bishops who belonged to that circle were not given titles that identified them according to their see, the place or territory which they ministered to, but were identified by their people; so-and-so was not the bishop τῆς Τριμύθειας, of Trimuthis, but the bishop τῶν Τριμυθοῦντων, of the people of Trimuthis. Territoriality was secondary to people, to a community of persons; the church was not the church of a place, but of a people. Maximos expressed the same principle in the passage cited above, and indeed, does not mention territoriality at all.

¹ *Mystagogia* 1, II. 163–89; Christian Boudignon, ed., *Maximi Confessoris: Mystagogia; una cum Latina interpretatione Anastasii Bibliothecarii*, CCSG 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011). Author’s translation.

However, the reader should not be misled: by the time Maximos was writing territoriality had become a major part of the structures of the Church of the Empire. It is no mystery how this developed: it was a result of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the way in which, very gradually, the Church came to model its structures on those of the Roman Empire, structures themselves in the process of reorganisation and rearrangement in the time of Constantine, a reformation that had begun with his predecessor, the persecuting emperor Diocletian.

The Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 and his subsequent protection of and support for the Christian Church had a profound impact on the Church's understanding of its relationship to the world in which it found itself. The Roman imperial ideal (the claim to a universally acknowledged, and welcomed, jurisdiction and authority throughout the inhabited earth) and the Church's sense of universal mission (the obligation to preach the gospel to all nations) exercised a mutual influence, the results of which can be felt – not least in the Eastern Orthodox world – to the present day. This synthesis of the Roman imperial ideal and the Church's universal mission is first laid out and celebrated in two works by Eusebius of Caesarea, the *Life of Constantine* and the *Encomia*, both composed in honour of Constantine on the occasion of his thirtieth anniversary of accession as emperor. This sense of a providential 'fit' between the Roman imperial ideal and the Church's universal claims predates Eusebius; one can even detect an allusion to it in the dating and detailed list of rulers, beginning with the Roman Emperor, with which the Evangelist Luke prefaces his account of the ministry of Jesus in his Gospel (Luke 3:1–2). With Eusebius, however, the symbiosis of Empire and Church is worked out in greater detail. The emperor is presented as appointed through God's providence to establish a state of peace in which the Church can preach the Gospel. As the Word of God holds sway over the created order, so the Emperor is appointed by God to rule the inhabited world, the οἰκουμένη; in return the Church prays for the emperor and for the victory of his armies in defending the peace of the empire. Emperor and Church share a common concern for