

The Body of the Living Christ: The Patristic Doctrine of the Church Report on a Recent Symposium at Princeton University and Seminary

Seraphim Danckaert

Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) is widely regarded as the foremost Orthodox Christian theologian of the twentieth century. Given Florovsky’s pioneering role in the ecumenical movement, it is hardly surprising that some of his more popular essays focus on ecclesiology, including an ecclesiological topic of great concern to many today: the limits of the Church.¹ But Florovsky himself was not overly interested in the more mundane aspects of ecclesiology – jurisdiction, governance, or canons. He recognized the existence of such problems but expended far more energy on what he called “the greater thing.”² questions of a deeper theological nature.

It is for this reason that the Fr. Georges Florovsky Orthodox Christian Theological Society of Princeton University decided to examine the *doctrine* of the Church at its second annual patristic symposium. Held at Princeton University and

¹ G. Florovsky, “The Limits of the Church,” *Church Quarterly Review* 117 (1933): 117–31. Florovsky republished the same argument in a refined and strengthened form as “The Doctrine of the Church and the Ecumenical Problem,” *The Ecumenical Review* 2 (1950): 152–61.

² In 1967, Florovsky delivered a series of four lectures at Fordham University under the title “The Images of the Church in the Greek Fathers.” See page 15 of the fourth lecture, unpublished but available in the Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 4, Folder 12; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. An edition of these lectures will be published along with the proceedings of the symposium.

Princeton Theological Seminary on February 10–11, 2012, the symposium took its initial inspiration from Florovsky's longest ecclesiological essay, "Le corps du Christ vivant: Une interprétation orthodoxe de l'Église,"³ and featured plenary lectures on the doctrine of the Church in the New Testament, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Maximus the Confessor, the Byzantine canonical tradition, Fr. Georges Florovsky, and Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae. Short papers delivered during the concurrent sessions covered such figures as St. Clement of Rome, St. Hilary of Poitiers, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Justin Popović, as well as more synthetic themes.

The papers and discussion were extremely rich but confirmed that there is no single, comprehensive "definition" of the Church. The observation is no surprise, nor does it imply that something is amiss. As Florovsky wrote:

It may be true that there is still no definitive and authoritative definition of the Church. But there is the Church herself, as a divine institution, visible, historical, and yet transcending and uniting all ages and all stages of her historic pilgrimage in the continuity of her being.⁴

Instead of an authoritative "definition," we find in both Scripture and the Fathers a variety of "images," to borrow a point that often appears in Florovsky, including in his 1967 lecture series on the Church at Fordham University. There are, he argues, two major "images" or "dimensions" of the Church: the historical and the soteriological. The first recognizes that the Church is a social reality within history; the second includes the realm of the mystical, spiritual, and dogmatic, which, ultimately, Florovsky defines as the "redemptive

³ G. Florovsky, "Le corps du Christ vivant: Une interprétation orthodoxe de l'Église," in *La Sainte Église Universelle: Confrontation œcuménique. Cahiers Théologiques de l'actualité protestante. Hors-Série 4*, (Neuchâtel/Paris: Dalachaux et Niestlé, 1948), 9–57.

⁴ G. Florovsky, "Obedience and Witness," in *The Sufficiency of God: Essays on the Ecumenical Hope in Honor of W.A. Visser 't Hooft*, eds. R. Mackie and C. West (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 58–70, at 65.

dimension” of the Church. It is this latter reality – the Church as the locus of mankind’s redemptive union with God in Christ – that gets closest to the essence of the matter. For the Fathers, the primary phrase that conveys the redemptive reality of the Church is the Pauline one: “the Body of Christ.”⁵ As Florovsky wrote in “Le corps du Christ vivant”:

The Pauline conception of the Body of Christ was taken up, and diversely commented on, by the Fathers of the Church both in the East and the West, before it was largely disregarded and even abandoned. It is high time we returned to this experience of the ancient Church, which can offer us a firm foundation for a modern theological synthesis. Truth be told, while this conception has often been forgotten by theologians, it has never been forgotten by the Church, since it always remained the existential basis of all sacramental and spiritual life across the ages.⁶

Here Florovsky articulates precisely what the symposium tried to do, if only in a very preliminary way: Look to the common heritage of the Church – Scripture and the Fathers, both East and West – in order to tackle *modern* theological problems; and, when doing so, to remain grounded in the sacramental and spiritual life of the Church. This is not an historicist or polemical methodology, but rather what Florovsky called “ecumenism in time” – an attempt to break free of all provincialisms and to conceive of the Christian tradition as essentially one throughout history, most especially in the first millennium, with an eye toward constructive and faithful theological work in the present age. This is, needless to say, a

⁵ Examples from the Fathers are too numerous to catalogue, but a few passages from the Cappadocians deserve mention, since these Fathers are not treated in the summary below. See Basil’s *Ep.* 146.1, *Ep.* 243.1, and *De Spiritu Sancto* 61; Gregory Nazianzus’ *Or.* 21.7; and a particularly rich passage in Gregory of Nyssa’s *In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius*, available in Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* 44.1304–1326, at 1317.

⁶ G. Florovsky, “Le corps du Christ vivant: Une interprétation orthodoxe de l’Église,” 22. English translation by Alexis Torrance, forthcoming in the symposium’s proceedings.