

The Parish and the Church

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1. The arguments about the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America adopted by the Ninth All American Sobor of 1955 are not “technical” arguments, but have a deep significance of principle. They involve fundamental questions relating to the life and organization of the Church. The passionate character of these arguments plainly shows that we are faced not only with two different “practical” settings which conflict with each other, but with two different conceptions of the whole canonical structure of the Church. In the Church – which is a living and growing organism – there is room for argument; it is legitimate to search for the truth and to seek the correct answers to the problems of modern life. But such arguments can be fruitful and useful only if both sides unconditionally accept as their common ground and point of departure the eternal and the unchangeable teaching of the Orthodox Church, as expressed in its dogmas and canons. The dogmas and canons of the Church are not subject to revision; such a “revision” would be tantamount to a “falling out” of the Church, to a rejection of Orthodoxy. We would like all those who argue about the Statute to keep this always in mind and to understand that the issue involved is whether we are to remain Orthodox, or whether under the name of “Orthodoxy” there is growing up something alien to the Church, something equivalent to a betrayal that would render all discussions of the Church’s organization senseless and futile.

2. Practically all discussions about the Statute centre on the problem of the parish and are concerned with the following questions: who is to be at the head of the parish? How should the parish be organized and governed? Several crucial points in this discussion require elucidation. The aim of this paper is to give a brief analysis of those points in which we can clearly detect a flagrant *departure* from the fundamental principles of the canonical and dogmatic tradition of Orthodoxy. We have purposely used the term “dogmatic” tradition, because despite the widespread notion that the dogmatic and administrative fields are unrelated to each other – the Church has invariably considered that both fields form inseparable parts of one and the same tradition based on the same dogmatic principles. The organization of the Church and its “administration” are wholly determined by the faith of the Church, i. e., by the doctrine held by the Church about herself. It is hence an error to think that the faith of the Church can be preserved if her diocesan and parochial organization is built up on new and purely secular administrative and juridical foundations. I do not propose to touch in this paper upon the question of who is responsible for a situation which is often used to justify the necessity for new forms and norms in the Church. This is a large and complex question. But whoever bears the responsibility and whatever the novelty of the present situation, the fundamental principles of the Church organization cannot depend on them. The points which are listed below are so *fundamental* that any departure from their original canonical meaning would be as I have already stated, tantamount, to a departure from the Orthodox tradition.

3. The first of these points is the question of the relation between the parish on the one hand and the diocesan – more generally, the ecclesiastical – authorities on the other.

In practice this refers to the so-called “independent parishes,” i. e., those parishes that determine their relation to the ecclesiastical authorities unilaterally. The general tendency is to claim that

the traditional conception of the parish as a part of larger organism (the diocese, the Church) contradicts the law of the United States, more especially the state laws of incorporation; the parish – so the argument runs – is incorporated according to the laws of the state, and this, perforce, makes the parish administratively independent and self-governing. However, it will be obvious to anyone who has some knowledge of American legislation, and in particular of the legislation concerning religion, that this assertion either rests on ignorance or is made with evil intent. 1) The American principle of separation of Church and State enables every religious community to organize its own life and administration in accordance with the teaching and rules of its faith. 2) The incorporation of a parish by no means makes it an “independent” and “self-sufficient” body, because all depends on what sort of society is being “incorporated”; hence it is not incorporation that defines the structure of a given society, but on the contrary, the structure and the basic principles of the society define the form of incorporation. In other words, it all depends on how the parish considers and defines itself, and any reference to American *law* is senseless here, because the only purpose of the law is to protect and legalize the self-determination of a group of believers. On the organization and administration of the American Orthodox Church the civil law is *silent*.

Hence it is clear that the idea of an “independent parish” is based on a distorted notion of the Church and is a rebellion against her basic norms. Let us briefly recall these norms.

I. Canonically, and hence administratively, the parish is a *part* of the Church and, like everything in the Church, is subject to the Church’s authorities, and in the first place to its bishop. A parish “independent” of its bishop or a parish that recognizes his authority only in a “spiritual,” and not in an administrative, sense, is a canonical absurdity.

II. The Diocesan Bishop has the following authority in the parish: he appoints its clergy and constantly supervises the entire life and activities of the parish either personally or through its clergy. This leads neither to arbitrary rule nor to “absolutism,” for the canons of the Orthodox Church as well as the Statute of 1955 define very precisely the means by which the Bishop exercises his authority; but to single out any one sphere of parish life and to claim that this sphere lies outside the competence and the jurisdiction of the Church’s authorities is to contradict the very idea of the Church as expressed in the words of St. Ignatius the God Bearer: “in the Church nothing is done without the Bishop.”

III. From this point of view Pastor is the representative of the Bishop and of his authority in the parish. The Pastor’s rights and duties are also strictly defined by the canons of the Church and by the Statute. But it cannot be emphasized too strongly that the notion of a priest as a hired person subject to the demands and dependent upon the conditions imposed by his employers – is not only false, but clearly heretical. We must remember that a parish priest, – the parish being part of the *Church* – represents the *Church* itself, its traditions, its teachings, its hierarchy; the Pastor is not subordinated to his parishioners, but both are subject to the aims, tasks and interests of the Church; and the Pastor views the interests of the parish in the light of this relationship of the parish to the Church as a whole.

IV. The Orthodox teaching on the Church asserts the possibility and necessity of *co-operation* between clergy and laymen on all levels and in all spheres of Church life (The Sobor, the

Metropolitan Council, the Diocesan Council, the Church Committee). Orthodox doctrine consequently rejects not only the monopolizing of authority by the clergy (Roman clericalism) but also the distinction between the sphere that is subject to the clergy's jurisdiction and the sphere that lies outside it (Protestantism). In the Orthodox Church everything is done *together*, in the unity of clergy and laity. But the term "*together*" means firstly that the bishop and the priest *participate* by right in all spheres of the parish's life, and secondly that to them, according to the hierarchical principle, belong the religious right and duty of sanctioning all activities. Nothing can be done in the Church *without* the hierarchy or against it, because by its very nature everything, including the material, financial and economic spheres of Church life, is subject to the religious purpose of the Church. A parish does not build a church, a school or any other building, neither does it collect money, simply to enrich itself; all this is done in order to carry out the teaching of Christ and to promote the well-being of the Church; hence every sphere of the parish activity is inwardly subordinate to religious aims and should be examined and appraised in the light of these aims. Therefore the active leadership, participation in and control of parish life by the spiritual head of the parish is both necessary and self-evident.

In the light of these principles we should unconditionally condemn all attempts:

- 1) to make a parish *independent* of the Diocese, the Metropolitan district and all other lawfully constituted organs of Church authority;
- 2) to "incorporate" a parish in contradiction to the above principles;
- 3) to distinguish between the "spiritual" and the "material" spheres of the parish's activity;
- 4) to treat the parish priest as a "hireling" who can be hired or dismissed by decision of the Church Committee;
- 5) to deprive the priest of his rightful position of leader in all forms of parish life.

In our opinion failure to accept the points listed above is equivalent to a violation of the basic principles of Orthodoxy; this danger we submit, should be brought to the attention of all Orthodox people.

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Published by: Committee on Convocation of the 10th All-American Church Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America [NY], 1959