

The Synod Guiding the Church: A Patristic and Theoethical Perspective

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Introduction

The notion of the synod of hierarchs of the Orthodox Church, as a final authority for guiding the church derives from the biblical example of the first synod of the Apostles. This Synod in Jerusalem even included the Apostle Paul.¹ In this paper, I will focus on the idea of the synod of the hierarchs of a national church which also accepts the principle of freedom of religion. The synod of hierarchs guides the church by defining *praxes* for the needs of others in its ministry. Our present discussion turns around principles of Orthodox contextual theoethical thought. To that end, I will argue that the hierarchs of the synod require additional input, apart from their own priestly insights, in order appropriately to fulfill their mission of guiding the church. One of the chief motives of this paper is to examine the reasons why Orthodox hierarchs in synod need ideas and creative input from the other ranks of clergy, including ordained deaconesses,² as well the laity, both male and female; all with their own irreplaceable perspectives on truth gained from life-experiences.

Expanding the Synod's Perspective

Currently, the perspective that dominates the typical Orthodox synod is that of an all-male, celibate clergy. The church hierarchy operates within a cultural context that does not permit a rich diversification of opinions or backgrounds. Differences in education, culture, gender, and age could and should enlarge the present limited hierarchical perspectives. Introducing ideas and opinions from wider representations of the clergy, deaconesses and the laity, would create for the hierarchs a new and fruitful ground for more energized and

¹ *Acts*. 15:1-41.

² In this paper, terms such as theoethical perspective, theoethical education, theoethical values or objectives, mean that the perspective, education and values or objectives are in accord with theological truths and principles, based on the Scripture and Tradition.

appropriate ideas to surface during synodal deliberations.³ The personal experiences of such ‘new blood’ in addressing the real needs of the faithful would be invaluable for the hierarchs in their attempt to define relevant *praxes* for the ministry of the church in the modern world. These ideas can be communicated by many various ways: such as appointing representatives through clergy and laity congresses, by holding large pre-synodical consultations, and through standing advisory committees. Through this diversification of ideas, taken from a genuine range of church life and life-condition, and listened to seriously, hierarchs could resolve serious issues in the life and ministry of the church in a more authentic way. In this way, diversification of opinion and background should be an important objective for the synod in its pre-deliberative discussions.

One of the more challenging issues in expanding the perspective of the hierarchy involves the inclusion of women into close clerical standing, through the ordained female diaconate. In our present context, the church does not ordain women presbyters and women bishops. However, the church can, and did, ordain women to the diaconate.⁴ Through such an ordination, once restored, women deacons could offer an invaluable input to the synod, for guiding the church in confronting needs in its ministry and, in particular, for addressing the unrecognized needs of Orthodox women and young girls. Such a renewed ministry would have untold benefits for the Church at large, and for Orthodox women in particular (among whom the deaconesses would primarily work). But more than this, the ordination of women to the diaconate would also renew the conscience of the church, and give a deeper more appropriate perspective to the formal reflections of the holy synod.

³ T. B. Carter, *The First Amendment and the Fourth Estate: The Law of Mass Media* (Westbury, NY: Foundation Press, 1994), 21-74.

⁴ See Theodorou, *The “Cheirotonia” or “Cheirothesia” of Deaconesses*; See also Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*; J. A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2008); K. K. FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998); E. P. Eftychiadis, “Building an Orthodox Contextual and Liberative Social Ethics: Based on the Liberative and Salvific Theological Values of Deaconesses’ Ordination,” Ph.D. diss., Union theological Seminary in the City of New York, 2004.

Orthodox Contextual/Pragmatic Theoethical Thought

This pressing issue of offering ‘new perspectives’ to the mind of the hierarchs of the synod derives from a relatively new aspect of Orthodox thinking which we can designate as pragmatically contextualized theoethical thought; but although ‘recent’ it is as old as the church, for it concerns the way the earliest apostles and fathers and other missionaries, determined how best to preach the Word in their surrounding context of need. For example, even in that first apostolic synod contextual thought was being applied decisively and innovatively. Because of needs of new Christians from the gentiles, it was decided that the Apostle Paul be specifically dedicated to confronting these needs of Christians who were not of Jewish descent.⁵ That contextual theoethical decision, led to one of the most important efforts in the ministry of the ancient church dedicated to the needs of Christians in every cultural context in the Tradition. Pragmatic Orthodox contextual theoethical approaches are also witnessed extensively in the ‘economy’ of the great Fathers in the Eastern Early Church, and can particularly be seen in Chrysostom’s contextually orientated theology. He was constantly relating his theological stance to new ‘situations’ or *praxes* that were offered to him by the needs of his flock: the poor, needy, and neglected. These occasional needs he also took to be far more than peripheral; rather they were the instances of the voice and will of God ⁶. In responding to these newly perceived needs, he extended the range of this thought as well as developing the real-world effectiveness of his church’s ministry. Most of the effective Orthodox missionaries, throughout the following centuries, also seriously considered the cultural context of those who were to become Christians. By considering the culture of these persons, the missionaries were able to reshape their messages in a way that the indigenous culture could understand. The missionaries once they had established the basics of the church went on also to use the roots of the indigenous cultures of the newly illuminated converts whom they were serving, in order to define new standards of contextually sensitive *praxes* for meeting the ongoing spiritual and material needs of their new flocks. They ensured that these very new cultures and *praxes* of Orthodoxy were authentically in accord with the Scripture and tradition;

⁵ *Acts*. 15:1-41.

⁶ J. Chrysostom, in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Hom. in Mt (PG 58. 629-630); Hom in 1 Cor (PG 61. 179); Hom in Mt (PG 58.762-763). See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992).

yet resonated well with the indigenous traditions that they had ‘fulfilled,’ not destroyed. This is why in some cases some of the local traditions had to be substantially modified to bring them into line with biblical and ecclesial tradition.⁷ Even to this day, we can note, almost all the churches belonging to the contemporary World Council of Churches use important elements of contextual theoethical thought in their reflections.⁸

So far I have spoken of four phases inherent in the process of this new tendency of Orthodox contextual and theoethical thought: (1) defining the contextual/pragmatic praxes in the ministry of the church; (2) defining theoethical objectives for the new contextual praxes; (3) defining relevant contextual theoethical praxes to meet new needs, in place of previous praxes that may have become irrelevant to the people’s real needs; and (4) using and building benevolent cultural institutions, guided by contextual approaches and theoethical objectives based on Scripture and Tradition.

In relation to the first phase, our objective ought to be for the new praxis to be highly contextual and aimed always at confronting immediate localized needs relevant to a particular cultural situation. The main motivation behind this would be to identify what these needs are and to confront their causes.⁹ This contextual praxis would be expected to be relevant to new needs. At the end of this first phase, however, we are still limited to cultural analysis: we still have only a contextual relevant *praxis*.

The second stage in our Orthodox reflection would be to include theoethical reflection aimed at defining this new contextual praxis so that it should be in accord with the values and principles inherent in Scripture and Tradition. To achieve this purpose, this new contextual praxis can be modified or redefined, in order to develop theoethical objectives. In this way, whatever new *praxis* we have identified would be in accord with these two fundamental compasses of our faith.¹⁰

⁷ See H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1975); See also C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); D. J. Hall, D. J. *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); T. F. O’Meary, *Theology of Ministry* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

⁸ See L. L. Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); See also L. S. Mudge, *The Church as Moral Community* (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1998).

⁹ Chrysostom, Hom in Mt (PG 58. 629-630); Hom in 1 Cor (PG 61. 179); Hom in Mt (PG 58.762-763).

¹⁰ Chrysostom, Hom in Mt (PG 58. 629-630); Hom in 1 Cor (PG 61. 179); Hom in Mt (PG 58.762-763); T. G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2002), 59-61, 116-119, 135-144.

Let us take, as an example, the case of the ministry of a church deciding to provide shelter and food to single mothers. Through theoethical reflection, it was determined that this *praxis* was in accord with objectives derived from the Scripture and Tradition. Moreover, it was decided that this *praxis* should be redefined so as to be progressively enriched with objectives that more forcibly responded to the real and present needs of single mothers. This happened by defining new *praxes* for supporting this particular instantiation of single mothers, related to the original *praxis*. At first it was decided that the church could assist these mothers to acquire appropriate educational training, in order to find a job. This *praxis* was of great significance to these mothers. The mothers felt confident in their abilities and gradually became able to support their families. Another related theoethical objective for the mothers was to help them join the ecclesial community and participate in its ministry and its worship. These additional theoethical objectives present to us a caring ecclesial community that was responding not only to material needs of persons in need, but also to these persons' spiritual needs.

The third phase of a contextual theoethical process would include the church's desire to define or accept new relevant *praxes*, in confronting new needs, in place of previous *praxes*, which may have become anachronistic or irrelevant in the face of new needs. Even a long accepted *praxis* in the life and ministry of the church could be substituted with a new relevant *praxis* addressing new needs, after the previous *praxis* had become irrelevant to the ongoing real needs of the people.¹¹ This is also common sense in human beings, men and women. The new *praxis* should be contextual and pragmatic and always guided by theoethical objectives derived from Scripture and Tradition. Through this approach, which inevitably leads to dynamic and vital change, the church will show that it can adapt and develop its ancient ministry. This will prove to be very beneficial for the needs of the faithful as well as many other needy human beings in society.¹²

The fourth phase of this contextual theoethical thought would include using and building cultural institutions, guided by theoethical objectives, aimed at confronting and developing needs in the ministry of

¹¹ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 111-123, 198-205, 248-271; Chrysostom, Hom in Mt (PG 57. 60); Hom in 1 Mt (PG 57. 268); Hom in Mt (PG 58. 591); Hom in Mt (PG 58. 557-558).

¹² See McGuckin, *Eschaton and Kerygma: The Future of the Past in the Present Kairos. [The Concept of Living Tradition in Orthodox Theology.]* St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly. vol. 42. Nos. 3-4. (Winter)1998. 225-271.

the church.¹³ In reality, almost every aspect of the life and efforts of faithful persons and of cultural groups and communities, in confronting complicated needs, requires the use of pragmatically contextualized cultural institutions derived from Scripture and Tradition. Through this approach of using and enlivening cultural institutions, the church would maximize and strengthen its effectiveness, in confronting human needs in its ministry to the world. For example, as part of their ministry, certain local churches decided to cooperate in an ambitious effort to build affordable housing for low-income families. Many individual members of the church and other local cultural institutions contributed to this effort. The churches contacted a construction company for initial advice on various aspects of the project. Later, this company contributed a great deal to the construction of these houses. The churches also contacted a real estate company, which was managing land outside the town. This company proposed land, which could be purchased relatively inexpensively, and the proposal was accepted by the churches guiding the project. The local churches then applied for a loan. The application for this loan was directed to certain federal financial institutions, which offered loans at low interest rates. The churches' application was approved as a reliable project. The financial institutions involved immediately assessed that the construction of these houses could contribute a great deal to the vital needs of individuals and families. As the project was developing, all the participants in this project (individuals and managers of cultural institutions) often met in the churches that had participated in the project. The purpose of these gatherings was for the faithful to participate in the worship of the various church communities. The experience of the liturgy further strengthened their spiritual life as well as their unity and dedication to the project.¹⁴ The statement of the need, arrived at from pragmatic reflection, brought many people together with cultural institutions in an initiative led by the Church, to alleviate real needs in a new way.

Conclusion

My point in all this, is that this process of reflection cannot be short-circuited. It has to be lived in, and lived through: it is the fabric of the faith as lived out in reality; and it culminates in a wisdom that contributes quintessentially to the missionary effort of the local church. It

¹³ See Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community*; See also Mudge, *The Church as Moral Community*.

¹⁴ See I. Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy* (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1996).

is precisely here, at the synodical level, that it needs to be recognized as such. And it is here that it has to be added to the formal reflections of the synodical hierarchs: not as an afterthought, or merely as the ‘opinions’ of outsiders to the synodical process of discernment: but rather as substantive witness to the faith, derived from the life-experience, the *praxis*, of the Orthodox people. From this input to the hierarchs of the synod, from other clergy, including deaconesses, lay men and women, the hierarchs who guide the church, could thereby define and propose new and authentically Orthodox *praxes* to the church at large, or indeed could recommend to the church that it now ought to set aside certain previous *praxes*, which have become irrelevant to our present needs. When truly related to the local community, by virtue of a deeply grounded contextual relationship through all the energies and experiences of its faithful people, the Hierarchical synod would be truly in a position to speak wisdom, and to lead in the effort to create a dynamic new missionary involvement with the presently existing benevolent cultural institutions.