

Authority in the Church: Confronting Contemporary Challenges

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Introduction

The consideration of authority in the Orthodox church leads us directly into the roots of the tradition and history of the Church. To understand the primary sources, we must acquire not just the words and forms that the fathers have bequeathed us; we must go further, and enter into the minds of the fathers; think as they did, and creatively marry the best that civilization has to offer with the deep mysteries of the Incarnation. To be considered faithful, one cannot simply follow the forms of the holy inspired masters, one must also reason as they did and thus conform to them with the mind and the heart.

The fathers seem to have chosen a system of practical authority and administration in the church that was quite untraditional and very modern for a religious movement. They copied the diocesan administrative system that Diocletian perfected for the Roman Empire. They chose well, for this system has survived for the best part of two millennia. The Diocletian system was comprehensive, had clear lines of authority and combined centrality with local responsibility and initiative. The organizational system survived the fall of both halves of the Roman Empire, the death of Latin, the expulsion of Greek speakers from Africa and Asia and many other evolutions. It adapted itself to the Age of Empires and the rise of Colonialism. These wise and learned men adapted for God the best that Caesar had to offer at the time. The diocesan system was part and parcel of Christianity's absorbing and transforming classical culture to create Christian civilization.

Had they been more traditionalist, the holy fathers might have modeled their administration upon the Hebrew priesthood, or the Davidic kingship, or perhaps the charismatic stance of the prophets; they might have chosen models from the diverse cults of paganism, or the schools of the philosopher. Instead they chose the best organizational model that contemporary secular society had to offer, and it has endured for a long time. Few human institutions have lasted as long or have been handed down through society without interruption. I would argue that in this present age, Orthodox clergy should think to do likewise; namely to

show the same creative, adaptive, and spirit-filled mindset that the ancient fathers had. For today we face, in the light of God's great gift of the Enlightenment and the advances of modern civilization, the same task that the fathers had in coming to terms with God's great gift to them of Classical Civilization and winning it for Christ. In this essay, I will consider some ways that Orthodox clergy might re-express the exercise of authority in the church today.

Hierarchical Authority

No one starting out today would think the Diocletian system the best system of administration the world has to offer. As the great poet, Tennyson, wrote: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, And God fulfils Himself in many ways, Lest one good custom should corrupt the world." Yet no one who reverences the deep and holy history of the church would wish to abolish what tradition has so long sanctified and established. No one who has witnessed the collapse of the Greek presence in Constantinople over the last two generations, and the vacant corridors of the Phanar today, can be unaware of how much 'the old order changeth.' We are required to adapt to new realities. Orthodox clergy should seek to lead the church by aiming to perfect the achievement of the past by grafting onto it the insights that modernity and reason have taught mankind.

In this light, it follows that the Church's system of authoritative governance ought to be the best available. It should maintain the old, yet at the same time borrow from proven systems of order and administration created by the secular world and tested by time in that context. Obviously, our hierarchy would not want to follow every clever experiment that will later be found wanting. But neither would they want authority to be expressed only in ways that represent a time that none of us today would choose to live in: a time of widespread illiteracy and superstition, of economic backwardness, of plagues, famines, and deadly sanitation, where sometimes the opportunity to get enough to eat was worth putting on the appearance of renouncing all the pitiful suffering the world had to offer, and the joy of having a family was all but a death sentence.

One of the things we should note in considering the place of clerical authority today is the relative decline in the real authority of all hierarchies in modern societies. This attenuation of hierarchical authority in modern liberal society results from the very nature of our societal values, where authority has been 'disintermediated,' and made more varied and diffuse. It cannot be otherwise where knowledge and learning,

freedom and autonomy, increased wealth and spontaneous forms of order through self-regulation define the nature of the society.

The ancient authority once wielded by the bishop, and reflected in the legal codes, is largely illusory today. If we consider what is the authority of a bishop in America, we will ask: Does he have the resources to build churches, found seminaries, establish hospitals, persuade talented people to become priests? If he excommunicates people, will they no longer commune in Christian society? If he asks for their substance, will they yield him their treasures? If he tries to lead, will many follow him just because of his hierarchical position? Today he must specifically persuade them. If he relies on the habit of blind obedience, he will be an archaic fish in a Republican sea. Which is all to the good. For the church is the body of Christ, not the administrative arm of his special service. Each branch of the vine encompasses the whole. Unity itself is of diminished value unless the unity reflects the eternal values of the church, to which all members, not only hierarchs will devote their service. Jesus himself defined authority as service in humility and submission. How splendid that we live in a time where the priesthood of all believers has become a little more actual, and a little less theoretical than in the past; and a time when authority needs to be expressed in love and persuasion rather than in administrative *fiat*.

When we look back over the arc of history, it is clear that the Late Roman imperial administrative system of authoritative leadership grew out of a cult of the Roman emperors as gods, and was negotiated onward by Christians towards a theory of the divine right of kings. But how distant is the spirit of those times from our own Republican age. In writings about kings and their legitimacy, three points are salient. One is that the monarch was a unifying principle for the state, one that was meant to prevent division and civil war. Another is that he was a unique point of connection between the secular order and the divine. The third that the monarch was a kind of perfect father to his people. The Episcopal role has also been written about in similar terms in the history of the Church.

Whatever its merits, the downside of this model is considerable. Many pagan Caesars were driven to madness by the need to separate themselves from humanity and literally to pose as gods on earth. The temptation for a leader to pose as a god was resisted by the early Church as idolatry. Anyone who mimics this role of leadership, taking it seriously, absent humility and grace, is in certain danger. There is also the problem of supervision and checks and balances to consider. In the West, the papacy could at least provide a supervisory function for local leadership at times. In the East, the theory of *Symphonia* gave to

Emperor then Czar a role in balancing and supervising the episcopate that today is lacking in democracies. I would argue that to be more faithful to the Byzantine past, a powerful and representative lay assembly should exercise a similar role today; at least if the traditional Orthodox episcopal economy is to function as it did under emperors and princes.

If we could ever find a perfect man to put in charge, who would not prefer a monarchy? Christ, the archetype for authority in the Church is King, not an elected representative. In the political world, however, democratic or representative government, as exists in the United States, is founded on the pre-supposition that people are imperfect, that their interests and desires do not accord perfectly with the common good, and that a means must therefore be found so that the authority of imperfect (though presumed to be virtue-seeking) individuals can be checked, but also coordinated with other imperfect (though equally virtue-seeking) individuals. This model would do much to invigorate the real exercise of authority in the church. A more democratic sense of authority, balanced and checked, with virtue and citizenship understood as accruing to *all* the faithful is simply more true to the facts of human existence in a democratic age, one of material plenty where knowledge and advanced education are widespread, and especially in a country like the United States where the burdens of citizenship are assumed by all from an early age.

Heavenly Citizenship versus Blind Obedience

America has been blessed by many enlightened and talented immigrants from the Old World. They, too, have benefited from the blessings of our wealth and freedom. But often there persists in our cultural imagination a short-sighted, un-Christlike, attitude that middle class American culture is without distinction and unworthy of consideration. A lifetime of reflection has taught me, on the contrary, that America is just as interesting as Periclean Athens, and just as remarkable a civilization. This prejudice is in part understandable, since life in America often seems such an extreme departure from the traditions of Christian Europe, which gave so much to this world. But America is equally Christian, having old traditions from England that descend from Augustine of Canterbury, but has now become an expression of Christian civilization that in many ways has brought mankind closer to the spirit of the gospel. Republican America can make a claim to be perhaps the most advanced Christian society in the contemporary world.

The American system is proven by time and many other measures to have virtues not common in any polity where Orthodoxy has been historically planted. To outsiders, the American system seems to be based on individual freedom, greed, and self-interest. A closer look would reveal that this is only one side of the coin of “citizenship,” namely freedom co-joined with responsibility. Judges have authority, but the jury of citizens determines guilt or innocence. Voters decide who will hold public office. The right to possess weapons is predicated on the citizen helping to maintain public order. Generals direct armies, but citizens fight the wars, and the elected President is commander in chief. When crises occur, one knows in this country that the person standing next to you is a fellow citizen and can be counted on to act for the common good. People of privilege actively help the less advantaged to join the élite for the sake of the nation. Even immigrants are habitually welcomed with open arms, and no one much minds if they are blind to our beauties and strengths should they choose to live in an intellectual and emotional ghetto.

In a nation of free citizens, authority comes from the consent of the citizens as expressed in republican institutions. This provides tremendous power, since every member of a republican body is capable of taking action for the interests of the whole. The result has been an explosion of abundance, freedom, creativity, learning, and human progress unique in the history of the world. In similar terms, the concept of citizenship in the Kingdom of God is foreshadowed by St. Paul’s words:

The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3.24-28)

Following the Apostle’s profound insight we need to realize that how to organize an empire of subjects and slaves is a very different question from envisaging, and organizing, a republic of free citizens of heaven. We may be tempted to think of the past as the ‘Golden Age’ of Orthodoxy. The Apostolic period is, of course, the touchstone of the formation of the kerygma of the Church. But when has the Kingdom of God actually been most apparent in post-apostolic Christianity? The good news is that the future could be, should be, and almost certainly

will be the true golden age of Christian authority. The Kingdom of Christ is not of this world. It is the realm of the Holy Spirit, who is present in all places, all things, and all human hearts. It is monarchical, because there is only one God and one Savior. It is aristocratic, because it claims for its own all things that are good, all that are profitable, and all that possess beauty in this world. And it is democratic, because he who is the least in this world is great there, and the last in the world shall be first there, and true authority will reside in the one who truly gives up his life for Christ.

The Full Inclusion of Women

Our clergy, to renew the vitality of their authoritative leadership, must also give serious thought to ending the exclusion of women from full participation in the church. This is something fully demanded by both the spirit of the times and by the mystery of the Gospel which the Apostle Paul adumbrated saying: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The culture of condescension to women has started to be as effectively abolished in most of society through the power of Christ’s revelation, as has human slavery before it, and the exclusion of the gentiles. It is up to the Church to acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the complete humanity of females and their inalienable dignity of bearing the complete image and likeness. It is not the role of the church to try to fight against this revelation or to try to negotiate it away. We live in a world where nations are now judged by their treatment of women. Religions will soon be judged that way too. The current structures of our contemporary Orthodox church would crumble without the loyal support of its many women. But they chafe under the discrimination so often leveled against them, and often serve the Church despite this wounding burden. The same talents that have allowed women to lead successfully and authoritatively in politics, law, academia, the arts, business and basically every area of modern life would also allow them to be excellent leaders of the church.

The Celibate Episcopate

A related question is whether the effectiveness of hierarchs would be increased by relaxing the rules introduced in the Byzantine era that a bishop must be unmarried. On the one hand, in contemporary society, there is no longer a large celibate talent pool. Fewer wives die early from childbirth or other causes, so widowed priests are much rarer

than they used to be. The number of monks is now tiny. Moreover, the prestige of the monastic vocation, while still considerable, is not as great as it once was. People are more likely to feel alienated from leaders who have never shared the responsibilities of family life and work life in the world that defines their normal days. This is a question our Church needs to re-examine seriously under the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Effective Bureaucracy

Even the most visionary and powerful leader is but one man, whether he is Alexander the Great, or a simple parish priest. For his authority to have any effect, whether that authority is military might or the redeeming force of the gospel of peace, requires both motivated followers and a competent like-minded bureaucracy. The study of leadership in the modern world has shown that an outdated bureaucracy, the fear of the initiative and talent of one's colleagues and subordinates, a failure to define clear goals, the exclusion of groups (ethnic, gender, laity), an underutilization of the gifts of technology and communication, a lack of curiosity about the intellectual resources developed by others, excessive isolation and levels of bureaucracy: all these things make a position of authority (even of apparently great authority) into no authority at all. In the modern world time has become generous, in that the creation of value is soon recognized, and also pitiless, in that institutions of great age and vast scope and significant prior success can be superseded in the blinking of an eye.

At the same time, the hierarchy of today has available to it resources that are unprecedented in the history of the Christian Church: but only if it can learn how to deploy them. There is simply no previous time in human history that can compare to the way the common people can today command skilled resources. For the hierarch who takes this for granted, yet still assumes blind obedience as a value, such skills will merely limit his authority; because even the common people today will no longer follow blindly. However, such skills could powerfully multiply the effect of the authority of a deft and enlightened leader. The old kinds of hierarchical tree that Diocletian used to hold the Roman Empire together, will no longer suffice. Even large organizations today have discovered that hierarchies have to remove layers, become flatter and nimbler with better communications and more initiative at all levels in order to be effective.

The French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted 175 years ago, that one of the defining characteristics of American culture is

volunteerism, more so than in any country in Europe. This means that Americans who join churches:

- Are very likely to belong to several other groups, and not make the church their sole group organization and identity.
- Expect to be involved, and show initiative in church, just as they do in other groups.
- Expect the leadership of groups to be collegial, not a benevolent dictatorship.

Naturally, Orthodox believers do not expect to modify the liturgical practice or the theology of the church. That would defeat the purpose of being Orthodox. Nevertheless, a hierarchical leader of the church who wished to expand his authority has a ready-made and eager crew of followers among American Christians, once he has come to understand the culture of volunteerism. The Lord has told us that every sparrow, every hair of our head is numbered. The same Lord has provided a universe of diverse talents to every parish in the land. An effective hierarch will number the gifts of his flock, and use these gifts to multiply his work. He will give the gift of encouraging and enabling each member of his flock to use their gifts. In this way, his authority, which is, after all the authority of doing Christ's work, will be multiplied.

In short: the Orthodox Church must learn to avoid being a museum frozen in time, but become a place of life and community and growth, that is more deeply rooted in time than any other church. Just as he has done for two thousand years, Christ on the cross whispers to our hearts "I thirst," and it is for souls that he thirsts. He thirsts for us to show to these souls in our modern world the depth of his love, all that has been done beautifully in his name for the past two thousand years, and also all that we can now do beautifully to satisfy his thirst and provide a home for his infinite love. And he tells us that ultimately change is not the enemy of tradition and not the enemy of depth, because only through change in time can the Church and each individual soul discover ever greater depths of holiness and love.