

Elder Porphyrios (+ 1991), *On the Church*

the mystery of faith is great...

The Church is without beginning, without end and eternal, just as the Triune God, her founder, is without beginning, without end and eternal. She is uncreated just as God is uncreated. She existed before the ages, before the angels, before the creation of the world – *before the foundation of the world*, as the Apostle Paul says (Eph. 1:4). She is a divine institution and in her dwells the whole fullness of divinity (Col. 2:9). She is an expression of the richly varied wisdom of God. She is the mystery of mysteries. She was concealed and was revealed *in the last of times*. The Church remains unshaken because she is rooted in the love and wise providence of God.

The three Persons of the Trinity constitute the eternal Church. The angels and human beings existed in the thought and love of the Triune God from the beginning. We human beings were not born now, we existed before the ages in God's omniscience.

The love of God created us in His image and likeness. He embraced us within the Church in spite of the fact that He knew of our apostasy. He gave us everything to make us gods too through the free gift of grace. For all that, we made poor use of our freedom and lost our original beauty, our original righteousness, and cut ourselves off from the Church. Outside the Church, far from the Holy Trinity, we lost Paradise, everything. But outside the Church there is no salvation, there is no life. And so that compassionate heart of God the Father did not leave us exiled from His love. He opened again for us the gates of Paradise in the last of times and appeared in the flesh.

With the divine incarnation of the only-begotten Son of God, God's pre-eternal plan for the salvation of mankind was revealed again to men. In his epistle to Timothy the Apostle Paul says, '*Incontrovertibly, the mystery of faith is great. God was revealed in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory*' (1 Tim. 3:16). The words of the Apostle Paul are dense in meaning: divine, heavenly words!

God in His infinite love united us again with His Church in the person of Christ. On entering into the uncreated Church, we come to Christ, we enter the realm of the uncreated. We the faithful are called to become uncreated by grace, to become participants in the divine energies of God, to enter into the mystery of divinity, to surpass our worldly frame of mind, to die to the 'old man,' and to become immersed in God. (Cf. Col. 3:9, Rom. 6:6, Eph. 4:22) When we live in the Church, we live by Christ. This is a very fine-drawn matter, we cannot understand it. Only the Holy Spirit can teach us.

In the Church we are all one and Christ is the head

The head of the Church is Christ and we humans, we Christians, are the body. The Apostle Paul says: *He is the head of the body, of the Church*. (Col 1:18). The Church and Christ are one. The body cannot exist without its head. The body of the Church is nourished, sanctified and lives with Christ. He is the Lord, omnipotent, omniscient, everywhere present and filling all

things, our staff, our friend, our brother: the pillar and sure foundation of the Church. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the basis – everything. Without Christ the Church does not exist. Christ is the Bridegroom; each individual soul is the Bride.

Christ united the body of the Church with heaven and with earth: with angels, men and all created things, with all of God's creation with the animals and birds, with each tiny wild flower and each microscopic insect. The Church thus became *the fullness of Him who fills all in all*, (Eph. 1:23) that is, of Christ. Everything is in Christ and with Christ. This is the mystery of the Church.

Christ is revealed in that unity between His love and ourselves: the Church. On my own I am not the Church, but together with you. All together we are the Church. All are incorporated in the Church. We are all one and Christ is the head. One body, one body of Christ: *You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* (1 Cor. 12:27) We are all one because God is our Father and is everywhere. When we experience this we are in the Church. This is our Lord's wish for all the members of the Church as expressed in His great high-priestly prayer: *that they may be one.* (John 17:11,22) But that's something you can only understand through grace. We experience the joy of unity, of love, and we become one with everyone. There is nothing more magnificent!

The important thing is for us to enter into the Church – to unite ourselves with our fellow men, with the joys and sorrows of each and everyone, to feel that they are our own, to pray for everyone, to have care for their salvation, to forget about ourselves, to do everything for them just as Christ did for us. In the Church we become one unfortunate, suffering and sinful soul.

No one should wish to be saved alone without all others being save. It is a mistake for someone to pray for himself, that he himself may be saved. We must love others and pray that no soul be lost, that all may enter into the Church. That is what counts. And it is with this desire one should leave the world to retire to a monastery or to the desert.

When we set ourselves apart from others, we are not Christians. We are true Christians when we have a profound sense that we are members of the mystical body of Christ, of the Church, in an unbroken relationship of love – when we live united in Christ, that is, when we experience unity in His Church with a sense of oneness. This is why Christ prays to His Father saying, *that they may be one.* He repeats the prayer again and again and the apostles emphasize it everywhere.

This is the most profound aspect, the most exalted meaning, of the Church. This is where the secret is to be found: for all to be united as one person in God. There is no other religion like this; no other religion says anything of this sort. They have something to say, but not this mystery, this exquisite point of the mystery which Christ demands and tells us that this is how we must become, that he wants us to be His.

We are one even with those who are not close to the Church. They are distant on account of ignorance. We must pray that God will enlighten them and change them so that they too may come to Christ. We see things in a human light, we move on a different plane and imagine that we love Christ. But Christ, who *sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*, (Matt. 5 :45) tells us: *Love your enemies* (Matt. 5:44). We need to pray that we may all be united, united in God. Then, if we live out this prayer, we will achieve corresponding results; we will all be united in

love.

For the people of God there is no such thing as distance, even if they be thousands of miles apart. However far away our fellow human beings may be, we must stand by them. Some people regularly telephone me from a town on the edge of the Indian Ocean – Durban is what it's called, if I am pronouncing it correctly. It's in South Africa, two hours drive from Johannesburg. Indeed, a few days ago they came here. They were taking a sick person to England and they came here first to ask me to read a prayer. I was very moved.

When Christ unites us, distances don't exist. When I leave this life it will be better. I'll be closer to you."

The Christian religion transforms people and heals them

Our religion is the religion of religions. It is from revelation, the authentic and true religion. The other religions are human, hollow. They do not know the greatness of the Triune God. They do not know that our aim, our destiny, is to become gods according to grace, to attain likeness with the Triune God, to become one with Him and among ourselves. These are things the other religions do not know. The ultimate aim of our religion is *that they may be one*. (John 17:11,22) Here the work of Christ finds completion. Our religion is love, it is eros, it is enthusiasm, it is madness, it is longing for the divine. All these things are within us. Our soul demands that we attain them.

For many people, however, religion is a struggle, a source of agony and anxiety. That's why many of the 'religiously minded' are regarded as unfortunates, because others can see the desperate state they are in. And so it is. Because for the person who doesn't understand the deeper meaning of religion and doesn't experience it, religion ends up as an illness, and indeed a terrible illness. So terrible that the person loses control of his actions and becomes weak-willed and spineless, he is flayed with agony and anxiety and is driven to and fro by the evil spirit.

He makes prostrations, he weeps, he exclaims, he believes he is humbling himself, and all this humility is a work of Satan. Some such people experience religion as a kind of hell. They make prostrations and cross themselves in church and they say, 'we are unworthy sinners', then as soon as they come out they start to blaspheme everything holy whenever someone upsets them a little. It is very clear that there is something demonic in this.

In fact, the Christian religion transforms people and heals them. The most important precondition, however, for someone to recognize and discern the truth is humility. Egotism darkens a person's mind, it confuses him, it leads him astray, to heresy. It is important for a person to understand the truth.

Long ago when people were in a primitive state they didn't have houses or anything. They would go into caves without windows. They would block up the entrance with stones and branches so that the wind didn't blow in. They didn't realize that outside there is life, oxygen. When he is enclosed in a cave, a person is worn down, he becomes ill, he is destroyed, whereas when he is outside he is revitalized. Can you understand the truth? Then you are out in the sun, in the light; you see all the magnificence of creation; otherwise you are in a dark cave. Light and darkness. Which is better? To be meek, humble, peaceful and to be filled with love, or to be

irritable, depressed and to quarrel with everyone.

Unquestionably the higher state is love. Our religion has all these good things and is the truth. But many people go off in another direction.

All those who deny this truth are psychologically ill. They are like those children who became delinquent or anti-social because they lost their parents, or because their parents divorced or quarrelled. And all those confused people find their way into various heresies. The confused children of confused parents.

But all these confused and ant-social persons have a strength and perseverance and achieve a great many things. They succeed in bringing normal and peaceable people into subjection. They influence other like-minded people and they prevail in the world because they are in the majority and find themselves followers. Then there are others who, although they do not deny the truth, are nevertheless confused and psychologically ill.

Sin makes a person exceedingly psychologically confused. And nothing makes the confusion go away – nothing except the light of Christ. Christ makes the first move: *Come unto me all you who labour...* (Matt. 11:28) Then we accept this light with our good will, which we express through our love towards Him, through prayer, through our participation in the life of the Church, and through the sacraments.

Often neither labour, nor prostrations, nor crossing ourselves attract God's grace. There are secrets. The most important thing is to go beyond the formal aspects and go to the heart of the matter. Whatever we do must be done with love.

Love always understands the need to make sacrifices. Whatever is done under coercion always causes the soul to react with rejection. Love attracts the grace of God. When grace comes, then the gifts of the Holy Spirit come. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-sufferance, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control.* (Gal. 5:22-23) These are the things which a healthy soul in Christ should have.

With Christ a person is filled with grace and so lives above evil. Evil does not exist for him. There is only good, which is God. Evil cannot exist. While there is light there cannot be darkness. Nor can darkness encompass him because he has the light.