

Salvation in Christ: Perspectives of the Orthodox Church

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Without doubt, the topic of this ecumenical conference, "Salvation in Christ," opens up enormous vistas for reflecting upon living experience, church doctrine, liturgical worship, and daily life. For me to attempt to address such a topic is daunting. I can only propose to outline what I consider to be the extraordinary richness of our Orthodox Christian tradition and then to make some pointed comments and references.

I will endeavor to do so in the following way. First, I will briefly explore salvation in the Old and New Testaments, and then I will more fully explore this theme in the life and tradition of the Orthodox Church.

Old Testament

Salvation in Christ rests upon the foundation of the prophets and righteous of the Old Testament, both Hebrew and Gentile. Indeed,

the Orthodox Church, with a strong sense of the communion of Saints, both triumphant in heaven and militant on earth, reckons many of the Old Testament persons as glorified Saints. Salvation in this period, even though provisional and partial when viewed from the New Testament, is nevertheless very much present, diverse, and intimately connected to the one, true God.

The reality and experience of salvation is widespread in the Old Testament. Prior to the coming of the Messiah, anything true and loving is not cancelled out by His person and work but rather is brought to fulfillment. Further, the Greek Fathers of the ancient Church, in their efforts to bear witness to the truth in the great debates over God and Christ, delighted in seeing the Word of God active in the Old Testament in His pre-incarnate state. To this day, Orthodox icons of Jesus always include a halo around His head with a cross shape that includes the Greek letters *ΩΝ*, the Septuagint translation for the divinely revealed name *YHWH* to Moses at Sinai (see Exodus 3:14). So, for these Fathers, the God of ancient Israel was equated not with the Father, whom no one has ever seen, but with the Son, who would later become incarnate of the Virgin as Jesus of Nazareth.

The Exodus from Egypt. The supreme experience of salvation before the incarnation was without question the Exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt around the year 1200 BCE (see Exodus 14). After the government turned against them, God's people were reduced to forced labor and they suffered oppression, including the very real threat of genocide (see Exodus 1:8–22). After a long time the Lord heard their anguished cries for help and worked through Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt through a miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea and into freedom of life and worship.

Such a deliverance still remains the prototype for God's passionate desire to save those who are oppressed, not just religiously but also politically and socially. Worldwide, the Orthodox Church has experienced more persecution and oppression in the last century than perhaps any other Christian tradition: Armenian and Greek Christians of Turkey suffered catastrophic repression and expatriation in the early twentieth century, and militantly atheistic Communistic regimes oppressed eighty-five percent of the Orthodox Church for most of the

twentieth century, stopping only about a decade ago. Do not we Orthodox know very well this basic Old Testament experience of political and religious oppression? Have not millions cried out to God for mercy, justice, and freedom?

The Psalms. After the Exodus, the book of Psalms bears profound witness to both the ardent desire for and the experience of salvation that is personal and communal. The language of salvation and deliverance permeates the vast majority of these public prayers, and Yahweh is always the subject to whom one prays and is the being ultimately responsible for relief, deliverance, salvation, justice, mercy, and forgiveness.

Although the language is stylized and does not readily admit an exact discernment of these personal crises, we can note that our Hebrew ancestors sought deliverance from many afflictions:

- ◆ False accusation or slander (see Psalms 4, 7, 26, 27)
- ◆ Personal enemies (see Psalms 5, 35, 54, 59)
- ◆ Grave illness (see Psalm 6)
- ◆ Persecutors (see Psalms 17, 56, 69, 142)
- ◆ Sin and sickness (see Psalms 32, 38)
- ◆ Fears and troubles (see Psalm 34)
- ◆ Estrangement from God (see Psalm 42)
- ◆ Sin (see Psalms 51, 130)
- ◆ Betrayal by a friend (see Psalm 55)
- ◆ Distress in old age (see Psalm 71)
- ◆ Oppression by the wealthy and powerful (see Psalm 73)
- ◆ Abandonment by friends when near death (see Psalm 88)
- ◆ Affliction and weakness (see Psalm 102)
- ◆ Association with the wicked (see Psalm 141)

These texts make it clear that the Hebrew people continually sought God for salvation and deliverance from an array of personal and communal distresses that reflect the full range of human suffering. They sought divine help for the personal and social conditions of their present lives. Moreover, they anticipated and experienced God's salvation repeatedly. Such experiences formed the bedrock upon which the Hebrew people lived, providing them assurance in time of need and hope for the future when help was not imminent.

The Prophets. The Old Testament prophets present a diverse array of salvation. For them Yahweh is the only proper subject, even when He works through human agents. Most of their attention is directed to the community of faith as a whole. Tragically, they were called upon by God to preach primarily judgment upon the community of faith during the monarchy. Even popular expressions such as the “day of the Lord,” which is taken up in the New Testament, and which originally referred to a saving intervention of God in history to deliver Israel from her enemies, was radically reinterpreted first by the prophet Amos:

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light;
As if someone fled from a lion,
And was met by a bear;
Or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
And was bitten by a snake.
Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light
And gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18–20)

Because of Israel’s own sins—particularly social injustice and exploitation of the poor and needy—salvation turns into judgment. This judgment serves, along with other prophetic indictments, as a permanent warning to people of faith: beware lest you think you are guaranteed your salvation irrespective of the way you live your lives!

However, after the greatest disaster to befall Israel—the destruction of Jerusalem, loss of kingship and the temple, and exile to Babylon in the early sixth century—it was the prophets of the exilic period who preached the good news of salvation to a community longing to hear a message of forgiveness and hope. In particular, it was above all the figure known in scholarly circles as Deutero-Isaiah who delivered this promise (see Isaiah 40–55). Despite their years of hardship and punishment for their rebelliousness, the people of Israel will now see a new act of salvation from God, who will honor His sacred covenant by providing protection (see Isaiah 41:14), pay the price for their freedom (see 43:3), and even work through the Persian king Cyrus (see 45:1). This new saving act is compared to a new exodus:

just as Yahweh once redeemed His people from oppression in Egypt, He will now act to redeem them from oppression in Babylon. Moreover, its announcement constituted a gospel in its own right:

How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
Who brings good news, who announces salvation,
Who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
Together they sing for joy;
For in plain sight they see
The return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
You ruins of Jerusalem;
For the Lord has comforted his people,
He has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
Before the eyes of all the nations;
And all the ends of the earth shall see
The salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:7–10)

New Testament

The New Testament presents a remarkably diverse vision of salvation, centered upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

First, during His own ministry, Jesus saves persons from their individual physical, spiritual, psychic, and even social and economic needs. So Jesus saves us from:

- ✦ All kinds of physical sickness, such as the fever of Peter's mother-in-law (see Mark 1:29–31);
- ✦ Chronic and terminal physical ailments, such as the epileptic boy (see Mark 9:14–29) and a leper (see Mark 1:40–42);¹
- ✦ Permanent disability, such as two blind men (see Matthew 9:27–31), or deformity, such as the man with the withered hand (see Mark 3:1–6);
- ✦ Various forms of demonic possession, such as the man with an "unclean spirit" (see Mark 1:21–28);

- ✦ Sins, such as the paralytic at Capernaum (see Mark 2:1–12);
- ✦ The threat of death, such as Peter who was afraid of drowning (see Matthew 14:22–32);
- ✦ The power of wealth, as when Jesus instructed the rich man to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor (see Mark 10:22);
- ✦ The power of evil or the devil, as expressed in the Lord's Prayer (see Matthew 6:13);
- ✦ Physical death itself, as in the raising of Lazarus (see John 11:28–44).

Second, Jesus brings salvation, healing, and reconciliation to groups of people. Foremost, He saves the entire human race from the power of sin and death. This constitutes the heart and soul of God's ultimate salvation in Christ.

In his correspondence, Paul speaks of salvation in Christ in a rich variety of ways. It is:

- ✦ Mediated through the saving message of the gospel (see Romans 1:16–17);
- ✦ Freedom from the power of sin and death (see Romans 6);
- ✦ Freedom from the Old Testament Torah or law (see Galatians 2:15–21);
- ✦ A new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17);
- ✦ Justification or righteousness (See Romans 4:25);
- ✦ Peace with God (see Romans 5:1);
- ✦ Reconciliation (see Romans 5:10–11);
- ✦ Divine adoption (see Galatians 4:4–7);
- ✦ Life in, or the gifts of, the Holy Spirit (see Romans 5:5; Romans 8).

Above all, Paul's favorite expression for describing salvation is the phrase "in Christ" (see Galatians 2:20; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 8:1, 16:7), which, along with the notions of divine adoption and new creation, has exercised great influence in the life of the Orthodox Church.

The Gospel of John describes salvation as a new birth, rebirth, or life in the Spirit (see John 1:13, 3:3–6). The Eastern Christian Tradition

has customarily understood such language in reference to the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation. In addition, such a completely new identity is interpreted in profoundly realist and mystical terms. Further, John uses the word *zōē* to describe this new reality, a Greek word meaning “life” that contrasts with *bios*, mere biological existence (see, for example, John 5:4, 10:9).

The New Testament presents salvation in Christ as entirely different from certain current, popular Jewish expectations of a messiah-deliverer who would unite Jews and reestablish the long dormant kingdom of David by leading a political or military overthrow of Roman rule in Palestine. However, it would be a mistake to consider that salvation in Christ is a purely spiritual phenomenon—involving the power or condition of sin and its consequences, including sickness, evil, corruption, and death. Salvation embraces the totality of human life—physical, social, economic, and even political.

Jesus was passionately concerned for the material and economic well-being of the poor, the outcast, and the powerless. He fed large crowds spiritually, through the word of His teaching, as well as physically, by multiplying loaves of bread and fishes. At a Sabbath meal in the home of a Jewish leader, Jesus taught that food for the poor and needy was essential for life in God’s kingdom.

He authoritatively pronounced blessing in this life upon the poor, hungry, and distressed, along with curses upon the rich, well fed, and happily content (see Luke 6:20–21, 24–25). In the parable of the last judgment, Jesus radically identified Himself not with the wealthy and powerful but rather with the poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned (see Matthew 25:31–46).

Further, after Pentecost the Apostolic Church did not meet just for worship, learning, and fellowship. Rather, all believers shared their material wealth and provided directly for the poor, holding back nothing as their own private possession (see Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–35). Such a radical, communal pattern of living, while appearing quite idealistic, actually became the evangelical precedent for the later charismatic movement among Christians when the age of persecution was in decline and the age of empowerment by the state was emerging. We now know this movement by its institutionalized form as monasticism.

The influence of this form of radical obedience to the evangelical commandments of Christ exercised great influence in the life of the Orthodox Church.

In addition, it is clear that salvation in Christ also involved social and spiritual freedom for those who were marginalized, powerless, or despised by respectable members of society. To the chagrin of His fellow Jews, Christ openly extended the gift of salvation to those who were reckoned as “sinners,” disreputable people such as prostitutes, adulterers, the ritually unclean, tax collectors, the physically disabled, schismatics and heretics (such as the Samaritans), and women, who were second-class citizens in Jewish and Roman society. Jesus’ liberal social manners—touching, conversing, and dining with such people—earned Him the scorn of those who were scandalized by His unconventional behavior and who blasted Him as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19).

There are even political undertones to salvation in Christ in the New Testament. Perhaps most strikingly, these are presented in the Gospel of Luke, beginning with his narrative of the birth of Jesus. Alone among the Gospel writers, Luke mentions that Jesus was born during the reign of the powerful Roman emperor, Augustus, one of whose titles was “Savior,” the one who provides safety from external enemies and well being for all within Rome’s sway. Therefore, when the angel says to the shepherds, “to you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11; emphasis added), it is more than merely possible that Luke’s original hearers would have instinctively grasped a dimension of the gospel that we all too easily miss: with the first coming of Jesus, a saving power and presence is realized that subverts even the greatest human authority. So, for Luke, peace, order, security, and prosperity come not through Caesar Augustus but through Christ the King. Indeed, many in the pre-Nicene Church, subject to varying forms of persecution, grasped such political implications. Thousands of believers went to their death rather than compromise their identity in Christ by calling the Roman emperor “Lord” or burning incense before his statue. Is there not a sobering message to Christians who live in America, which has become more powerful than Rome ever dreamed? How easy it is for

us to associate the gospel and the Church with such a dominant world culture! Yet to say that Christ's kingdom is not of this world means, if nothing else, that it cannot be identified with any political, economic, or social system, including Western-style representational democracy wedded to free market capitalism in a global, consumer-oriented society.

At the same time that salvation in Christ is revealed to be an accomplished fact and present experience, a few related matters are critical to a complete picture. First, salvation is a *future hope and fervent expectation that awaits final fulfillment with the Second Coming of Christ*. This is why Paul frequently refers to salvation as a future event (see 1 Thessalonians 5:8–9; Philippians 3:20; Romans 13:11). Second, salvation is a *dynamic, ongoing process that believers are called to cooperate in*. It is significant that the Apostles summarize Jesus's essential preaching with the words, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).² In addition, Paul accents both the process and the necessity of human cooperation (see 1 Corinthians 1:18): "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:1–13). This passage perhaps best expresses the principle of synergy, or dynamic cooperation between God and humans in salvation, which became a pronounced teaching and experience in Orthodox tradition.

Third, while salvation is guaranteed from the side of God, who acts decisively and ultimately in Christ, *it carries no such guarantee from the side of humans, who, through the misuse of their freedom, can lose this most precious gift right up to the end of their lives on this earth*. Were this not the case, Jesus's own teaching would be unintelligible:

- ◆ Our righteousness must actually be better than that of the scribes and Pharisees (see Matthew 5:20);
- ◆ We must change and become like children (see Matthew 18:3);
- ◆ Without repentance, we will suffer the same fate as those who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell (see Luke 13:5).

The parable of the last judgment is loaded with irony: both the saved and the damned are equally surprised with their sentencing (see Matthew 25:31–46).

Likewise, Paul's ministry only makes sense if the earliest believers were in danger of forfeiting the gift of salvation through the misuse of their freedom. He castigates the Galatians when he declares, "You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

In conclusion, we may note the dual nature of salvation in Christ in the New Testament. First, and negatively, we are saved from the power of sin, death, evil, the devil, judgment, and the tragedy of Torah observance. Second, and positively, the gift of salvation involves:

- ◆ The rich variety of gifts of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12:4–11);
- ◆ Reception and growth in divine glory that is physically transforming (see 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:21);
- ◆ Conformity to the image of God's Son (see Romans 8:28);
- ◆ All spiritual blessings in heaven (see Ephesians 1:3);
- ◆ Blessedness in death (see Revelation 14:13).

Such positive aspects of salvation, together with the gospel themes of transfiguration and resurrection, as well as the Pauline ideas of divine adoption and living "in Christ," will be developed with astonishing richness in the Orthodox Church, culminating in the teaching of *theōsis*, referring to divinization or deification.

Church Tradition

We have briefly explored the richness and diversity of the biblical witness. The Orthodox Church has an equally rich and diverse experience and reflection upon this heritage of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, centered upon the incomparable person of Jesus Christ. In the holistic vision of salvation in Christ in the Orthodox tradition, I can identify a number of complementary poles:

- ◆ Matter and spirit
- ◆ Person and community
- ◆ Now and not yet

- ◆ Grace and free will
- ◆ Gift and task
- ◆ Image and likeness
- ◆ Security and doubt
- ◆ Society and cosmos

This all-encompassing vision is based squarely upon the following foundations:

1. The history of God's saving words and acts finds its ultimate fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the enfleshed Son of God who is both fully divine and fully human. The incarnation is best viewed not as a single event, such as His birth, but as the entire narrative of Christ's earthly life, from birth to ascension. The climax consists of His Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.
2. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as a permanent gift to believers through the believing community, empowering faith, bestowing charismatic gifts, uniting all, and leading the Church into the fulness of truth.
3. The Holy Trinity: God as three distinct persons united in one common divine nature, radically distinct in essence from all creation yet radically connected in energies to all creation, above all through the person and work of the Son and the Spirit.
4. A vision of creation and humanity that embraces both sobering realism, in view of the power of sin, evil, and death; as well as realistic optimism, based upon what God has ultimately done through Christ and the Spirit and as shown above all by the glorified Saints.
5. A vision of the Church as the body of Christ, whose chief identifying characteristics are unbreakable unity, limitless love, and liberating truth. Most of the Orthodox Church, in fact, still lives in cultures much different from America, which is marked by individual liberties, capitalistic consumerism, abundant material resources, great political power, and, at least until recently, unusual security. By contrast, most Orthodox

live in cultures shaped more by limited material resources, more of an emphasis on community rather than individuality, far less political power, and physical and spiritual suffering.

Ancestral sin. Important to the theme of salvation in Christ is its opposite: sin and judgment. While no official dogma exists in the Orthodox, some remarkable views color the way we look at salvation. First, following the teaching of Irenaeus of Lyons, the Greek Fathers generally understood Adam and Eve as innocent and simple beings, more like children, who needed to grow up using their free will correctly.³ For Theophilus of Antioch, in fact, they were created neither entirely mortal nor immortal. Through the misuse of their freedom and disobedience toward God, the first human pair failed to grow in the right way and so allowed sin to enter the human condition, bringing with it evil and death as the “wages of sin.” As a result, the image of God in humans became obscured and covered with dirt, but not obliterated and destroyed.⁴ In general, the Christian East avoided any teaching of the radical corruption of humanity, or, as a logical consequence, the predestination of some humans for salvation and others for damnation.⁵ The Fathers view this corruption of God’s original creation in terms of mortality, disharmony in the environment and among personal relations, loss of innocence, and easy enticement to do evil. So, despite catastrophic consequences, human nature for the Greek Fathers remained essentially good, even if flawed.⁶ Human beings were still free to obey or disobey God. However, with our enslavement to the power of sin, we needed God’s gracious words and acts ultimately to lead us to the saving person of Christ.

Thus, according to the remarkable reflection of Gregory of Nyssa, “[Man] became himself the discoverer of evil, but he did not therein discover what God had made; for God did not make death. Man became, in fact, himself the fabricator, to a certain extent, and the craftsman of evil.”⁷ Further, hell is not a place created by an angry God who wants to inflict punishment but is rather the *self-inflicted* penalty that follows from rebellion against the divine will.⁸ It is the unintended consequence of God’s great risk in creating free creatures that can either accept or reject God. A few Fathers even went so far as

to completely demythologize hell. Isaac the Syrian, a seventh-century mystic and monk, taught that hell is, with one exception, exactly the same as heaven: the glorious, immediate experience of God's truth and love. The only difference is how God is *experienced*: His presence becomes hell for those who are unable or unwilling to accept His love and truth, which then becomes "the scourge of [divine] love."⁹

Grace and free will. In the Orthodox tradition, freedom is the dominant theme that emerges from reflection upon the human condition. First, God's freedom in creating is absolute and unconditional. God created not because He had to but because He wanted to out of infinite love. Second, human beings remain free to determine their own destiny, even though their freedom is relative and conditional because of the power of sin.¹⁰ So human freedom is limited by heredity, nurture, past sins, and unconscious motives.¹¹ Consequently, even though we still have a measure of freedom, we need God's grace for salvation. At the same time, God does not force human beings. As Maximus the Confessor explained, "The Spirit does not produce an undesired resolve, but it transforms a chosen purpose into deification."¹² The Orthodox Tradition is alien to a doctrine of "irresistible grace." Humans remain free to move toward or away from God.¹³ Salvation can only occur if creatures freely choose to unite with God. God invites all but compels no one.

Here we come to a precious teaching in Orthodoxy: synergy, or cooperation between God and humans in salvation. Certainly God takes the initiative and does the most important work through the Creation, the old covenant, and ultimately, Christ. However, human response is just as necessary, even if far less important.¹⁴ Since humans remain free, they cannot be healed without a free, positive response to God's initiative that involves conversion and repentance—not just as an event but as a life-long process.¹⁵ The fourteenth-century theologian Nicholas Cabasilas emphasized human free will in his magisterial study on the Sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist.¹⁶ Above all, he says, union with Christ presumes desire of the will and is found only in those who long for God with their whole heart and mind.

Divine grace and human freedom are intimately intertwined. Both are concurrent and cannot easily be separated. Once a person chooses God, grace has already prepared the way and operates at the same moment. One spiritual writer offers an analogy: just as yeast and flour combine to enliven dough, so grace and free will cooperate to enliven humans before God.¹⁷

Salvation is thus a lifelong task and consists of a paradox:

- ◆ Based upon work or merit, no one will enter the kingdom of heaven;¹⁸ and
- ◆ God can do everything except force human beings to love Him.

Salvation is consummated only in *freedom*, which itself can become too great a burden for us because of our self-sufficiency, self-centeredness, and self-isolation. Yet this burden of freedom is precisely the ultimate sign of God's love and goodness.¹⁹ Furthermore, sacrificial suffering, following the pattern of our redemption in Christ, is the ultimate expression of our true freedom.²⁰ Indeed, as we mature our union with the Lord brings suffering as long as the sacrifice and suffering are for the gospel and the sake of truth and love. Here I would include the suffering that comes from chronic, incurable illness. Could not those suffering from untreatable cancer be considered martyrs?

Image and likeness. Many important witnesses in the Orthodox Church make a distinction between God's image (*eikōn*) and likeness (*homoiosis*) in human beings.²¹ Image, even if distorted by sin, is a reality in all persons.²² Likeness, on the other hand, is a dynamic potential. In ancestral sin, humans retained the image but lost the likeness. As the new Adam, Jesus has not only restored the image but also fully realized the likeness. Thus, in and through Him, both are available to human beings.

In this regard, I will never forget the first time I met a genuinely holy person. During my seminary training, I spent about six weeks on Mount Athos, a rocky peninsula in northeastern Greece that is home to about a thousand monks. The ancient Monastery of the Rock of St. Simon (*Simonopetra* in Greek) served as a temporary residence. My first glimpse of the community's abbot, Father Aimilianos, was actually from a distance, while he was seated in a boat with some

younger monks. His countenance was radiant in a way I had never seen. I remember thinking later, "It was as if there was an invisible sign around his face saying, 'Here is an image of Christ.'" Subsequent experiences of Fr. Aimilianos only confirmed and strengthened this original intuition. His very presence exuded light, joy, peace, goodness, grace, love, and truth, and the community of faith over which he presided mirrored many of these traits. Such a personal encounter with holiness made reading the lives of Saints pale by comparison.

Sacraments. Springing from the incarnation, which is understood holistically, comes the deep Orthodox experience and appreciation of the role of the sacraments in salvation. Now that Christ has come, the relationship between the invisible, eternal God, and the visible, temporal Creation, has changed. In Jesus and through the Spirit, God has sanctified all matter and seeks to transfigure and redeem not just human beings but all creation. In the widest sense, there is really no limit to the number of sacraments in Orthodoxy, if by sacrament one understands a visible sign of invisible grace. In truth, there are not just seven but many more. The Orthodox Church has worship services for a funeral, the blessing of the waters (especially at Theophany), the consecration of the house of worship, the tonsure of a monk or nun, and the blessing of homes, vehicles, and businesses. Indeed, in the vision of Orthodoxy so much of what we take for granted is sacramental: the Bible, human beings, icons, and relics of Saints.

Further, it is far more accurate to say that the Church itself is a sacrament that has institutions rather than to say that the Church is an institution that has sacraments. For as the body and bride of Christ, the Church is the community of faith in which Christ Himself dwells, in the bold expression of some, a "continuing incarnation of the Lord." According to Nicholas Cabasilas, "When iron is placed in the fire, it becomes fire; it does not, however, give the fire the properties of iron; and just as when we see white-hot iron it seems to be fire and not metal, since all the characteristics of the iron have been destroyed by the action of the fire, so, if one could see the Church of Christ, insofar as she is united to him and shares in his sacred Body, one would see nothing other than the Body of the Lord."²³ More recently, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, a prominent contemporary Greek theologian,

has remarked that Christ dwells not in the mind or in the soul of individuals but in the community of faith as communion between God and believers.²⁴

Above all, the Orthodox Church recognizes Baptism and Eucharist as the supreme encounters with Christ that involve matter. Although predominantly celebrated for centuries as almost exclusively for infants, Baptism is understood as the spiritual rebirth of a person by symbolically dying and rising with Christ in the waters of the baptismal font.²⁵ The wholly formed new identity—"in Christ," to use the trademark expression of Paul—results from a personal, graced sharing in His Death and Resurrection. Closely connected with Baptism, even in infancy, is the Sacrament of Chrismation, through the anointing of holy chrism, a consecrated mixture of olive oil and spices. Through this chrism, God energizes the newly baptized through the reception of the Holy Spirit, constituting a personal sharing in Pentecost. Finally, Eucharist represents the common union of all believers (thus, "communion") in the flesh and blood of Christ, the true food and drink of faith, our "medicine of immortality."

However, we should note the dynamic quality of grace that operates. Through Baptism, one both becomes a child of God *and* awaits full adoption; one becomes reborn *and* awaits full rebirth; one is united with Christ *and* expects full union. Just as a newborn child has the power to grow up but is still not mature, so the newly baptized now has the restored power to grow in Christ but is not mature. As Symeon the New Theologian most forcefully expressed, baptismal grace can be lost through negligence, indifference, ignorance, or outright apostasy. Baptism does not constitute an "automatic" guarantee of one's ultimate salvation, just as physical birth does not guarantee one's abundant life as a human being. Especially now that infant baptism has been the norm for centuries, it is vital that the Orthodox Church impress upon parents and adult members the necessity of raising children to learn the gospel, reach a mature and informed acceptance of Christ as Lord, learn the evangelical commands, take responsibility for their choices, and cooperate with God's grace. The period of catechumenate, which preceded adult baptism in the ancient Church, now comes *after* Baptism for infants.

In addition, Eucharist, as the Apostle Paul first warned, can result in judgment, not just salvation, depending upon the quality of life of the recipient. Particularly, in our own time, when Eucharist is now being received far more frequently than it was when I grew up, it is important for our own members to realize that God's word is a double-edged sword, to borrow the phrase from Hebrews: it cuts away our sin if we come repentant and humble, but it will serve only to further harden our hearts if we are insolent and proud. Thus, when Eucharist, or any other Sacrament for that matter, is received in an appropriate manner and by a godly lifestyle, it constitutes an event of theosis, or deification, since a full union of Christ results.

Christian living. Emerging directly from within the ministry of the Apostle Paul, the life of a baptized Christian is a call to maturity, or growth, into the full stature of Christ. As one New Testament scholar expressed, salvation is absolutely assured from the perspective of God, whose promises and their corresponding fulfillment in Christ are irrevocable. However, salvation is not assured from the perspective of human response, which can waiver. We remain completely free to continue in the path of salvation or to deviate from it right up to the end of life.

The icon that is displayed in Orthodox churches throughout the world on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent graphically portrays this conviction. We commemorate a seventh-century monk and writer by the name of John, who wrote a spiritual classic entitled *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. This is a monastic text that summarizes the living tradition of ascetical life in thirty successive steps, composing a symbolic ladder leading to fulfilled salvation in Christ. The icon shows a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. On it are Christians ascending at varying levels. To the side of the ladder are angels who help them along and demons who impede their progress. In fact, the demons are pulling some, including a few near the top off the ladder, and dragging them down to hell below. It is an arresting and sobering icon, and I often feel uncomfortable in front of it. However, the icon very accurately depicts the truth revealed through the Old Testament prophets and confirmed by the New Testament apostles: believers had better beware of assuming that they are guaranteed salvation that bypasses the judgment of a God who shows no partiality.

Another equally valid expression of the life in Christ is the modern saying attributed to St. Seraphim of Sarov, the nineteenth-century Russian monk who withdrew into the northern forests to live a solitary life of prayer, fasting, and repentance. To a disciple named Motovilov, he once said, "The aim of the Christian life is to acquire the Holy Spirit." Indeed, together they experienced the divine, uncreated light of God as they were transfigured by a glorious radiance that transcended natural light. Such is characteristic of a great deal of mystical experience in the Orthodox Church. It extends, so to speak, the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, as recorded in the Gospels. However, while the grace of the Holy Spirit has been poured out in shattering experiences such as this divine and uncreated light, some of the same glorified Saints also provide sobering warnings. According to St. Symeon the New Theologian (eleventh century), the inner experience of grace is not only possible but *necessary* for the believer. For if any Christian is unaware of the presence of the Holy Spirit within, he or she is *really dead and naked in soul*.²⁶

In addition, a few other features of personal discipline are especially noted in Orthodox tradition. The first is wakefulness, or vigilance.²⁷ Many of the spiritual masters of the Christian East characterized daily, busy, unreflective life as a drunken stupor from which we need to be awakened. "You are asleep; it's time to wake up!" The second is unceasing prayer, which has been understood in various ways throughout history: from a prescribed rule of prayer at least three times a day, to greater frequency, to a perpetual, living gift within the depths of the heart and mind that descends even to the subconscious and remains active during sleep. A third is asceticism, or spiritual striving. This can have an inner dimension, which involves personal struggle against sinful passions (such as laziness, anger, lust, and pride) as well as for godly virtues (such as gratitude, integrity, and love). Asceticism can also have a social dimension, involving relationships with others, beginning with loved ones, to do the same. Further, an ascetical struggle against the evil powers of the world must include a prophetic critique of society and a fight for social and economic justice.

Theosis. We now come to a very distinctive feature of the Orthodox Church's vision of salvation in Christ: the teaching called

“deification,” or “divinization.”²⁸ Put simply, deification refers to the full and real union of human beings with God. It accents the positive side of salvation: we are saved *for* glory, transfiguration, eternity, and fulness of life. Deification points to our present experience and future destiny: we are saved not only for fellowship with God but for deep and abiding communion. In Christ, we now are drawn into the very life of God. Other words in the tradition of the Orthodox Church point to the same reality, such as participation, likeness, communion, union, imitation, mingling, and beatific vision. The New Testament roots are widespread.²⁹

However, such a close bond is not absolute, but relative. All that God is by nature, we are meant to become by grace: holy, sinless, pure, loving, truthful, graceful, just, merciful, and eternal. Our created human nature does not change and become divine, as God is divine. An infinite distance still remains between the uncreated God who is unknowable in essence and saved humans who remain created.³⁰ Further, according to the creed of the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon, the divine and human are fully united in the one person of Christ without any mixture or confusion yet interpenetrating each other.³¹ Thus, human beings can fully and completely share in the life of the Trinity without ever ceasing to remain finite, created humans for all eternity.

Among the many different ways of speaking about the reality of salvation in Christ, deification springs from the core of the Church’s life, based upon her intuition of faith, lived experience, and theological reflection.

As evidenced in the New Testament, this teaching is articulated among the Church Fathers, beginning with Irenaeus of Lyons, who wrote in the second century, “The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”³² A perfect complement to this teaching is his apt statement, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”³³ In expressing the living experience of the Church, Irenaeus was simply drawing out the implications of the incarnation. This same insight was to be repeated in various ways by Fathers of the pivotal fourth century, especially Athanasius the Great,³⁴

Gregory the Theologian,³⁵ and Gregory of Nyssa.³⁶ In each case, their main motivation was thoroughly biblical: to preserve the full reality of salvation in Christ from false teaching and any compromise of the truth. Indeed, the debates over the person of Christ that raged throughout the first seven ecumenical councils (from the fourth to the eighth century) are most commonly understood within Orthodoxy as motivated by a pronounced *pastoral* concern for salvation. Near the end of this period, John of Damascus summarized three things that were accomplished in the incarnation of Christ: the assumption, the existence, and the deification of humanity by the Word.³⁷ Human beings were not merely anointed by grace, but assumed into a common, personal union with God.

Indeed, an important principle of the Greek Fathers can be stated as follows: all of creation, including human beings, lives in bondage to the power of sin, evil, and death. Someone human cannot, therefore, save creation, since he or she would likewise be in bondage. Only God Himself can save creation. And God has now, in the divine-human person of Jesus of Nazareth, done this by assuming all that humans are—body, mind, and spirit—except without sin. Gregory of Nazianzus said it well, “That is saved which is united with God.”³⁸ In addition, he said, “It was necessary for us that God should be incarnate and die that we might live again.”³⁹

Thus, the Orthodox would see two successive movements in the great drama of salvation. First, God descends, or bends downward toward humans, most completely in the incarnation of Christ. Second, as a result, humans can now ascend fully and completely into the glorious life of God.⁴⁰ A descent (*katabasis*) of God to earth allows the ascent (*anabasis*) of human beings to heaven.⁴¹ Through the emptying of divine status or humiliation of Christ into human life (*kenōsis*), humans are filled with grace and are exalted into the divine life (*theōsis*).⁴² However, this second movement represents much more than the restoration of paradise, or the original condition of harmony in creation and communion with God. For now human beings have the possibility of a fully mature fellowship with God, far beyond that enjoyed by Adam and Eve. Humanity now has access to a “grown up” intimacy with deeper, personal, and corporate union. Perhaps the analogy of human

development can apply here. Intimacy, love, and union between infants, children, teens, and adults have different types of varying depths depending upon the relationship and authenticity of human life. So also there are varying depths of intimacy and union between humans and God. Now, in Christ, we have both a present experience and a future possibility that simply were not available before, even in the beginning of creation.

Finally, let us note the dynamic quality of salvation or deification even in the age to come. This is far different from the static, popular notions of people playing harps and watching angels float by. For Gregory of Nyssa, we will continue to learn and grow even in the fulfilled kingdom.⁴³ As we reach each successive stage of growth in grace, we will transcend ourselves and reach out for more and never exhaust the infinite mystery of God.

Glorified Saints. The Orthodox Church has a strong sense of the communion of Saints—not just of the living but of the dead. Those who stand out most significantly we call the glorified Saints, whom we honor as heroes of faith and models of salvation in Christ. These include

- ◆ All the angelic powers
- ◆ Righteous men and women of the Old Testament
- ◆ New Testament apostles and evangelists
- ◆ Martyrs
- ◆ Monks & nuns
- ◆ Charismatic elders
- ◆ Rulers
- ◆ Clergy
- ◆ Theologians
- ◆ Married, lay people from all walks of life
- ◆ Fools in Christ, who witness to the truth through extravagant acts under the guise of madness

Yet there is, in general, very little autobiography. Most of what is known comes from the testimony of others. Above all, the Orthodox Church venerates the Virgin Mary as the “Mother of God” or *Theotokos*, because she freely chose to accept the incarnation of Christ, the Son of

God. She is, in short, the first among those saved in Christ, and because of her love and life, Mary continues to have a very active, supportive role in the salvation of the world. She is seen as the great example for all to follow, as one who became fully united with Christ.

Fate of the unevangelized. In its attitude toward those who never become Christian in this life, the Orthodox Church has no universal teaching. Nonetheless, a variety of opinions exist. These may be grouped into two broad categories. First, a more restrictive view holds that one can only be saved by belonging to the Orthodox Church in this life. Second, a more flexible view holds that just as membership in the Orthodox Church does not guarantee salvation, so nonmembership in the Orthodox Church does not guarantee condemnation. My own perspective follows the latter, based upon the following evidence.

First, the Old Testament contains some outstanding examples of salvation that include Gentiles, who were, by definition, not God's chosen people. In the post-exilic era, one can point to the following: the prophet Jonah is sent by God to preach judgment to the Assyrians, a hated enemy of ancient Israel. Much to Jonah's surprise and chagrin, they actually repent of their evil ways and are saved from God's imminent judgment. Second, the Moabite woman Ruth, once again from an enemy nation of Israel, exhibits astonishing loyalty to her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, as well as to Yahweh and Israel's sacred traditions of faith. As a consequence, she not only becomes the way in which Naomi is restored to a fulness of life but also becomes the great-grandmother of King David along the way. Third, the pagan Job emerges as a heroic, if complex, figure of faith and suffering, who is vindicated by God in the end against his religious friends who lack integrity.

Second, in the New Testament we have the ministry of Jesus Himself. The Gospels, to varying degrees, present Him as offering the gift of salvation to some of the least likely people: Samaritan schismatics, pagans, known sinners, untouchables, and the socially marginalized. Even though a Jewish rabbi with a Jewish ministry, Jesus appears to offer salvation with great liberality, intending it for all, without regard for race, religion, sex, socio-economic status, and so forth. In His parable of the last judgment, Jesus teaches that ultimate salvation is

based upon the quality of our relationships with other people, above all the poor, sick, and suffering, without any mention of faith in Himself. Indeed, the entire judgment catches both the redeemed and the damned by surprise. Then we have the witness of Paul, especially in Romans where he acknowledges pagan nonbelievers as a “law unto themselves” when they do what Torah requires, and Jews who do not accept Christ are still God’s chosen people upon whom God may yet have mercy.

Finally, the Orthodox Church has a variety of witnesses to the gracious mercy of God. Justin Martyr, the second-century apologist, taught that the “seeds of truth” are scattered everywhere, allowing people of all cultures to glimpse and live whatever measure of truth and grace is revealed to them. Gregory of Nyssa thought that hell would not be eternal, since unbelievers and unrepentant sinners will finally be freely converted. Isaac the Syrian, who demythologized hell, boldly taught that we should even pray for the conversion of Satan.

Further, the less pessimistic view that the Greek Fathers held regarding ancestral sin lends itself to a broader view of salvation. Because they generally held a less exalted view of Adam and Eve, so they held a less severe view of humans who sinned. Indeed, they still recognized inherent goodness in all human beings, regardless of race, religion, or philosophy. Though we are enslaved to the condition of sin, evil, and death, we are still capable of being good and doing good. No matter what our faith or lack of it, we are aided by grace even without realizing it. John Chrysostom even taught that the perfect harmony of paradise is still reflected on earth within a marriage and family of unconditional love and thirst for the truth, *even if the husband and wife have never even heard of God.*

In sum, I do not consider that the Orthodox Church has any difficulty whatsoever in (1) recognizing the goodness inherent in all human beings; (2) appreciating love and truth found anywhere in the world; (3) acknowledging not just the potentiality but the actuality that God is able to save whomever He will, regardless of formal religious identity in this life; and (4) admitting that the last judgment is completely in the hands of God and that there are going to be a lot of surprises, both within the Church and outside it.

Notes

All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

1. It is important to note here how the leper, cut off from the community because of terminal illness, is also healed *socially*, since he can now resume right relations within society.

2. The indicative imperative, which can denote continual or repeated action, is distinctly different from the aorist imperative, which denotes one-time action.

3. See the excellent summary in Kallistos Ware, "In the Image and Likeness; The Uniqueness of the Human Person," in *Personhood: Orthodox Christianity and the Connection between Body, Mind, and Soul*, ed. John T. Chirban (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 6ff.

4. Ware, "Image and Likeness: An Interview with Bishop Kallistos Ware," in *Parabola* 10, no. 1 (1985), 67.

5. Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 33.

6. Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 62–4.

7. *On Virginity*, 12, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, reprint, 1995), 5:357.

8. Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976), 257, 265.

9. Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), 141.

10. See Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man*, 20.

11. Ware, "The Uniqueness of the Human Person," 10–11.

12. In *Questions to Thalassius*. See the fresh translations of some of this correspondence in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilkin.

13. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 48–49.

14. Ware, "An Interview with Bishop Kallistos Ware," 67.

15. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 147–49.

16. Carmino J. deCatanzaro, trans., *The Life of Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974).

17. Christoforos Stavropoulos, "Partakers of the Divine Nature," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 191.

18. St. Mark the Ascetic, "On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works: 226 Texts," in *The Philokalia*, G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 1:125–46.

19. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 102–3.

20. Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, 35.

21. Fathers who recognize little or no distinction between image and likeness include Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, and Simeon the New Theologian (eleventh century). Those who deny any distinction at all are Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine. See Ware, "The Uniqueness of the Human Person," 6–7.

22. See Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man*, 21.

23. Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 91.

24. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 115.

25. See the classical Byzantine exposition of these three sacraments in Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*.

26. Cited in Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man*, 49.

27. In Greek, *nēpsis*.

28. In Greek, *theōsis*, or *theopoiēsis*.

29. These include John 5:21–29; 14:17; 17:21; 1 Corinthians 9:23; 15:52–57; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 13:13; Galatians 2:20; 3:26; Ephesians 4:11–13; Colossians 1:12–13; Hebrews 3:1, 14; 6:4; 2 Peter 1:1–4; 1 John 3:2.

30. See Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 74–5.

31. This is the classical doctrine of the "communication of properties" (*communicatio idiomatum*), whereby the human and divine energies co-mingle with each other without compromising the integrity of each nature. So, in the crucifixion, the divine in Christ shares in mortality, and in His transfiguration, the human shares in divine glory.

32. *Against Heresies*, Book 5, preface, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:526.

33. Translation mine; see *Against Heresies*, Book 4, 20:7, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:490. This beautifully parallels what *shalom* represents in the Hebrew tradition: fullness of life as God intends it (material and spiritual; personal, social, and cosmic).

34. *On the Incarnation*, paragraph 54, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 4:65. Especially note the classic expression, “For he [Christ] became human so that we might become god” (translation mine).

35. See for example, his *Letter to Cledonius*, in which Gregory states, “For that which He [Christ] has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved.” In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 7:440.

36. *The Great Catechism*, chapter 25, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 5:494–95.

37. See *Exposition on the Orthodox Faith*, Book 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 9:45–73.

38. Cited in Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 95–96.

39. Quoted in Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 102.

40. See Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 169–70.

41. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 97–98.

42. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 97.

43. See especially the section entitled, “Eternal Progress,” in Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson trans., *The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 111–20.