



# The Role and Position of the Orthodox Church in the Current Era

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## Abstract

When we consider the role of the church in the modern world, we also need to contemplate the relationship that exists between the church in God's Kingdom. Churches should not be considered as simply being institutions residing in various denominations but should rather be viewed as entities in the service of the Creator. As such they are essentially transcendent over any man-made institution and are inevitably bound to be responsive to the word of God as manifested in Holy Scriptures, Holy Traditions and daily living, and are expected to do His will until God's Kingdom comes. The church offers us an epiphany the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ – and of the Kingdom of God and it allows us to go back in time to the life of Jesus Christ as the God-man (*Theanthropos*), who is totally faithful to the Father. Not only does the church look backwards, but it also anticipates futuristic revelation. The manner in which the church and the world are interrelated is ultimately determined by the relationship of each to Gods Kingdom. The Orthodox Church today as always, strongly asserts the truth of freedom in Christ through its evangelisation, mission, theology, devotional and pastoral endeavours. It teaches that it is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church established by Jesus Christ in His Great Commission, and that all bishops are essentially the successors of Christ's apostles. Thus, the church upholds practices held by the original Christian faith, as they have been passed down to us via Holy Tradition and she has a life-giving role to play in a highly distressed world.

**Keywords:** Role, Orthodoxy, Eucharist, agape, mission, ecumenism, teachings.

## Introduction

The word “church” etymologically connotes an assembly of people meeting at the behest of a leader or leaders. In Greek the word *ecclesia* refers to people getting together to worship God in a private dwelling where workshop is conducted, and people are taught spiritual truths by the leader (Nicolaidis, 2010). The faithful who gather together are united through Jesus Christ to each other as well as to the Holy Spirit and God the Father comprising of a triune Godhead. In New Testament times the Church which was established by Jesus Christ is characterised as the Kingdom of God on earth and also as God's house and Holy Temple which had its prototype in the Old Testament era (Lampadarios, 2006). The Orthodox Church, also called the Eastern Orthodox Church, is the second-largest Christian church after the Roman Catholic church and has over 300 million members globally (Fairchild, 2017; World Bank Publications, 2005). Orthodox theology is for the most part based on Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition, which encompass the dogmatic pronouncements of the seven ecumenical councils, and the



teaching of the Holy Fathers. The church observes the earliest Christian faith, as passed down through Holy Tradition. The Church is the body of Christ according to I Corinthians 12:27. It is just that she prays for peace to prevail in all creation (Clement of Alexandria, Stromates 4).

Christians of the Eastern Churches refer to themselves Orthodox. This description comes to us from two meanings. The first meaning is a “true upright teaching.” The Orthodox Church has preserved and passed down the Christian faith, free from any error or misrepresentation from the time of the blessed Apostles. The second meaning is “true praise.” The Church also strives to bless, praise, and glorify the Trinitarian Godhead in every activity undertaken and in all doctrinal issues (Parry et al., 2017). The church is provided by God through the calling of the Holy Spirit and the members of the church are regenerated and pass through death, on earth, to eternal life. In addition, the church is a unity which incorporates the whole body through the Holy Mysteries and Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (Lampadarios, 2006).

From 1 Corinthians 11:16 we learn that the Church includes a number of local churches of God and Ephesians 5:23 advises that Christ is its Head while the members are the body of the church. In the Church, each member or soul has Christ as its Bridegroom. St. Augustine advises that the Church is a Communion of believers who gather together from all nations and God rules in their hearts as the “City of God” (St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XVII, c.1, in Migne, P.L., 41, 523). The Church was born on the Day of Pentecost when the Paraclete (Holy Spirit) descended on the Holy Apostles as the ‘Helper’ (John 14: 16). Through Baptism, saints are incorporated into the Church and become united in the likeness of the Lord (Acts 16:14).

The Church as a God established institution and Community of believers, has 17 autocephalous patriarchates and thus 17 Patriarchs. The foremost patriarchs are in Constantinople (Istanbul), Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch. The church comprises of a communion of various autocephalous churches, (see Figure 1), each having their own bishops and synods (Meyendorff, 1996). The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, the 270<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Constantinople is acknowledged by all the other Patriarchs as *primus inter pares* (first among equals) and is considered to be the spiritual leader of the Church (Binns, 2002). Nonetheless his title is honorific rather than affording him any real authority over churches other than those deemed to be Constantinopolitan.

Patriarch Bartholomew as well as inter-alia Patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria and All Africa, Patriarch Daniel of Romania, are staunch promoters of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue efforts to encourage religious freedom, the promotion of human rights as well as the protection of the natural environment. Ecumenism remains an important drive of the Orthodox Church (Morariu, 2018) and it has a conciliatory approach towards a Christo-centrally transfigured world through God’s grace (Nissiotis, 1985), in which peace, justice, and agape reign as the elements of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1).

The Orthodox Church is open ontologically to every human being, to all religions, so that the Kingdom of God could be achieved in this world (Stan, 1984). We can see this in the fact that after the Ascension of the Lord to heaven, the disciples started to spread the Gospel all around the world. This is the universal message of Christianity to the world. From the Orthodox perspective, the other religious faiths or religions can be viewed as remains of the primeval revelation that Adam and Eve had in paradise. Based on the idea of a unique God, the necessity of salvation, and the concept of man as psycho-somatic entity (Rus, 1978), non-Christian religions can strengthen the dialogue with Orthodox Christianity. This does not however mean that Orthodoxy will compromise its beliefs.

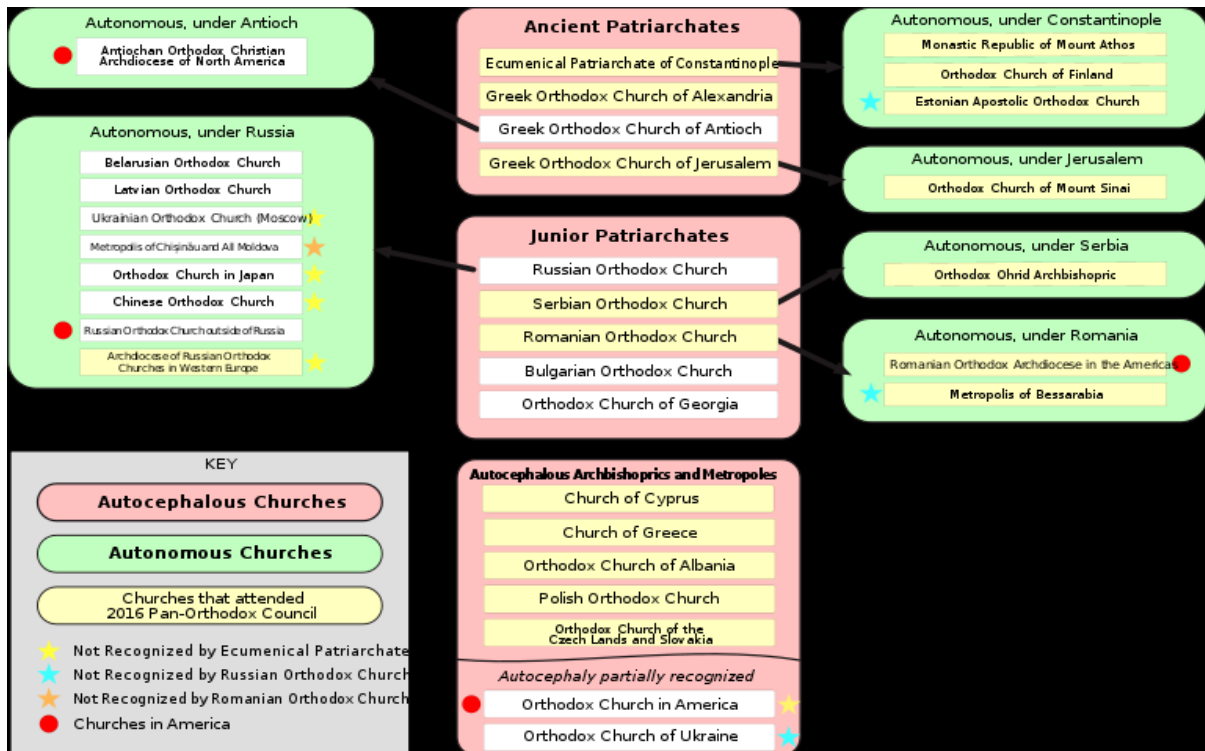


Figure 1. The organization of the Eastern Orthodox Church as of 2020 [Available online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization\\_of\\_the\\_Eastern\\_Orthodox\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization_of_the_Eastern_Orthodox_Church)]

The church needs to assume a far greater role in providing necessary moral and spiritual resources for its adherents to utilise when they are seeking to learn more about the faith. The church essentially needs to incarnate the faith into the daily lives of its believers while maintaining each teaching and prophetic role it has towards enhancing the well-being of society in general. Orthodox education has to be based on a socialisation model which manifests in the life of the church as people strive towards *theosis*. It is critical that the Church continues to cement its identity globally and it additionally needs to carefully evaluate and problematize secularisation and ultra-capitalism.

Concerning other denominations, we may quibble about certain theological boundary issues, but we need to spread the spiritual knowledge we possess and display the Church not as a monolithic entity but rather as one which has constant traditions which work and which it would be deleterious to seek to amend. Many people nowadays, even some Orthodox Christians, not only other Christian denominations, judge the Orthodox Church as being too traditionalist, being stuck as a “petrified mummy” (Bratsiotis, 1960), but they forget that tradition was one of the very foundations of Christianity essentially speaking, since one knows very well that Christ offered the Gospel orally to His disciples, therefore Orthodoxy lives and works in a permanent dynamism as true keeper of both Scripture and Tradition.

Fundamentally, Jesus Christ is the Logos incarnate and God is adored both in spirit and in truth. Our gnosis or transcendent knowledge must be made manifest to our brothers and sisters. Our Church is far more than a building, it comprises believers, those who are baptized and chrismated, people who obey the voice of the Paraclete and have a constant relationship with the triune Godhead and are sustained through sacrament, teachings and prayer.

It is vital that the Orthodox Church continues to have strong leadership and that there is firm cooperation amongst the various Orthodox churches including the Autocephalous and Autonomous churches. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is tasked with initiating and guiding careful thinking and decision-making based on inter alia Holy Scriptures, Traditions, dogma and canon law. The actions of the Church in the ecumenical movement should comprise of



regular dialogue and discussion with other churches and the sharing of viewpoints and united stances to be taken on a range of global issues as well as to communicate the truth of the Orthodox Christian faith to those who are unaware of it, in the hope of eventually ecclesial unity (Harakas,1992). Of course, the approach taken must of necessity always align with Orthodox Christian Tradition based on *akribeia* (exactitude).

Current Orthodox catechisms and a range of textbooks all uphold that the church accepts seven *mysteria* (sacraments or sacred mysteries) including baptism, chrismation, Communion, holy orders, penance, anointing of those who are ill, and marriage. The altar of the church is indeed a sacrament of grace and it distinguishes between seven major sacraments, with the Holy Eucharist being the primary one, and it is celebrated liturgically in synaxis (Ware, 2002).

### **The Sacred Mysteries**

The sacraments or sacred mysteries, are a sign and also a cause of God's grace and essentially they serve as a means of communication which points believers to the way in which they can arrive at their desired spiritual destination. This is done through communication using verbal and non-verbal cues. The sacraments include words and actions and material things such as bread, water and wine which when taken together as verbal as well as non-verbal elements, encompass the sacramental sign. The sacrament is an external sign of an inward grace as instituted by Jesus Christ (Lyden & Mazur, 2015). It is through consecration invoked by a bishop or priest, that the sacrificial bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ (Ware, 2002). God's uncreated energies (grace) permits people to partake in Him and to get to recognise Him. St. Basil affirmed: "It is by the energies that we can say we know our God."

The sacramental sign is basically a covenant of benevolence which conjures up a trusting response. God's grace is given to us freely without any obligation or price attachment. It is in Greek the word *charis* which is essentially God's free and unmerited gift of love to us which is passed on to us through the life of Christ and His incarnation, ministry, death and ultimately glorious resurrection (Papadopoulos, 1964). Thus, Christ's earthly life is a sign of God's enduring grace towards us as fallen beings. Jesus is for us the Logos from the Father who was made accessible and physically visible to us. In the traditional practice of the Orthodox Church everything which is in and of the Church is viewed as being sacramental or mystical (Harakas, 1987). The Church offers a new life in Christ. It includes men and women living by the Holy Spirit in harmony with God. Every facet of the new life of the Church participates in the mystery of salvation. The Church in its fullness and totality, is a profound transcendent and sacramental reality. The sacraments are ways in which we play a part in the divine grace of God and all in and of the Church is sacramental, since the Holy Spirit acts through everything that occurs within the Church. Nicolaidis (2010) stresses that the Ecclesia remain the *Laos tou Theou*, (nation of God) encompassing the complete corpus of Christ and the entire communion (or fellowship - *koinonia*) of all of the disciples of Jesus. Fundamentally, all baptised believers are part of the 'chosen race' and the 'royal priesthood', which form the holy nation of God. All are thus equally called by God to belong to His 'people'. Hopko (1999) informs us that the Orthodox Church exists as a "living sacramental and spiritual tradition, mystically actualized in her liturgy, realized in her saints, witnessed by her martyrs, defended by her confessors, articulated by her fathers and councils and always protected and preserved by the entire body of her members".

### **The Holy Eucharist**

The most sacred Mystery is the Holy Eucharist or Synaxis, in which the participants in the liturgy receive the consecrated bread and wine (understood to have become the body and



blood of Christ) directly connect with God (Karmiris, 1973; Harakas, 1987). Humanity's communion with the world is a communion unto death and so believers require a special food which sustains us for eternal life and this is the "mystical supper of the Son of God," the body and blood of Christ, through mystery of the holy eucharist which offers us a communion to Life Itself (Ware, 1963; 1975). In Christ and the Holy Spirit all which is wicked and dead becomes holy and living by the power of God the Father. It is then through Christ and the Holy Spirit that all the Church becomes a sacrament, or an element of the mystery of the Kingdom of God as it is even now being experienced in daily life. The sacraments, and also the Church, are both perceptible and invisible and within each there is an outward perceptible sign alongside an inward spiritual grace. God reveals Himself to believers and He communicates His grace upon us. It is the duty of the church To cooperate with God in seeking the renewal of his world (Meyendorff, 1983; Ware, 1963).

The Holy Communion (Eucharist - thanksgiving in Greek), is the primal Sacrament of sacraments in the Orthodox Church and it is partaken of during each and every Divine Liturgy. Christians, The bread and wine used in the Sacrament literally convert into the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eternal Passover Lamb, through the divine energies of the *Paraclete* (Comforter-Holy Spirit) (Ware, 1975). This Sacrament is arguably the most important one in the Life of the Church for a few reasons. First, the Eucharist brings us into communion with Christ. Through this communion with Christ, we can advance toward *theosis* and eternal life in the Kingdom of God (Karmiris, 1973; Harakas, 1987). Secondly, it gives us with a source of strength for daily life and offers us forgiveness of our transgressions. Once taken with appropriate preparation, repentance, and fasting, holy communion pulls us collectively into fellowship as God's people, His *ecclesia* (church) separates us from the evil in this world. The church awaits the life to come and the absolute fulfilment of God's love in open revelation of God's Kingdom (Ware, 1975; 1996). We get to knowledge of God through Jesus power which is exhibited through the relationships of the Orthodox Christian community and service in the *Ecclesia* (Nicolaidis, 2010; Papademetriou, 2005).

The early Church Fathers elucidated the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and acclaimed His redemptive endeavours through His Incarnation. Jesus thus accepted human nature totally and unified it with the Divine nature, thus redeeming it from corruption. Christ's various teachings during the course of His life and the moral laws explicated by Him enlightened humankind.

### **Value of the Eucharistic Feast**

Christ's ultimate sacrifice via His crucifixion affords humanity the chance to be freed from sin and able to reconcile with God the Father. Jesus established the *Ecclesia* to keep on with His work. Thus, the faithful celebrate the Holy Eucharist, they afford themselves the prospect to obtain access to redemption that derives from Jesus sacrifice for all of humanity, and this is a sign of the reality that God is *meth imon* or with us. Of course Jesus Resurrection also exhibited His omnipotence and additionally raised humanity to the possibility of life everlasting. The sacrifice of Jesus becomes the sacrifice of those who partake of the Holy Communion of the Eucharist and it is thus in a strong way a Church activity for building itself. The act of making the past a present reality, anticipates for us the future glory of His Kingdom. "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, (so) walk ye in him:" (Colossians 2:6). Saint Paul asserts: "by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). God's unmerited grace is therefore linked to our salvation. The Church teaches adherents to comprehend how grace affects our sense of what it takes to be saved.

In Orthodoxy, the Eucharist is also referred to as the Divine Liturgy thus denoting the work of people and this description stresses the corporate character of the Eucharist. The Church is



tasked with collaborating with God towards the needed renewal of God's world (Losch, 2002; Tischlis, 2013). The Church anticipates the life which is still to come, and the demonstration of *agape* love in an open revelation of His Kingdom. God's love is active in everything, by virtue of the dependence of all things on Him as the source. (Gregory of Nyssa, The Great Catechism, 37, Migne P.G. 45, 97).

When Orthodox believers attend the Divine Liturgy they come as a members of the Ecclesia and they accordingly participate in the very core of the Holy Church, which is the Worship of the Trinitarian Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is the heart of Orthodox belief and it embodies the Christian faith in an exceptional way. The Eucharistic food including the body and blood of the Lord, in which believers partake, and which was willed by the Lord and entrusted to His Ecclesia, enables us to enter into a oneness with the Lord and we then become the Ecclesia. All believers must hold fast to the faith that the Ecclesia is the sacrament of the salvation of the world (Rahner, 1967). Basil the Great teaches us that we need love and peace to be truly worthy servants of Jesus Christ (Epistle 203, 2. PG 32, 737B). Surely Christ will return again at His Second Coming judging the living and the dead (1 Peter 4, 5) and His Glorious Kingdom will never end (Luke 1:33).

### **The Church and Humanity**

Orthodox Christianity is lively and relevant and serves a spiritual home for millions of Christians throughout the world (Keum, 2013), and it still plays an important role in world events despite tensions between various Orthodox Churches over the Ukraine issue which plagues the world in diverse degrees. The Russian Orthodox Church has no less than 190 million adherents, which is clearly more than half the total of all Orthodox Christians. Nonetheless, the Church as the promoter of God's Kingdom cannot keep a distance from any specific creed and tradition and must never be indifferent to a range of global injustices, such as climate change, inequality, sexism, racism, corruption, abuse, violence and oppression that prevails in the world. The Church has an eschatological focus in its faith that does not permit her to be an apologist of "any national and racial ideology, political system, economic theory and praxis or even of human rights, since all of them are affected by the pervasive corrupting presence of evil" (Clapsis, 2016). The Church is an important social experience and its role is to save the world from sin and death. Thus, she is called to have an ongoing discourse with civil society and work with it towards the betterment of the world. She also needs to strongly support the right of each human being to actively participate in both social and public life.

The Orthodox church exists in a global village and supports democracy and the promotion of human rights. The Orthodox church is battling to cope at local levels with increasing cultural diversity, and what are serious and extremely complex economic realities and global insecurity which has seen tensions arise between its various elements from time to time. However, it fully accepts that Jesus became a man to save us and bring us back to our original condition and so we need to protect human dignity at all costs (Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 9, PG 74, 273D–275A). Consequently we need to peacefully and fairly coexist with others, and have a shared sense of community and be always happy to co-operate with our brothers and sisters across the world (Meyendorff, 1978; Nicolaides, 2010). Thus, inter-Christian cooperation is required so that we can protect human dignity and maintain harmony. Orthodox churches need to elect to relate with diversity others, with a sense of *agape* that guides them to uphold and vigorously uphold the human rights of all peoples. The Church needs to continue to demonstrate its pastoral care for families and the youth as they develop into mature Christians. Another aspect would be the strategy of dealing with the interreligious or mixed couples (persons who are Christian/Eastern Orthodox married to non-Christian persons). Could this make us speak of the necessity of an interfaith spiritual counselling strategy (Paloutzian & Park, 2005) that the Church needs to create or offer? The



reality of daily life in different parts of the world (one of them surely is the African continent) proves this to be a point to meditate upon. Of course, this would not mean to mix the Orthodox community with unorthodox or non-Christians, spiritually speaking, but to be actively listening and to consider the various spiritual needs of each couple or family. Here once again the social role of ecumenism comes to be determinant, in spite of many suspicions or prejudgments from the more traditionalist part of the community.

The Churches teaches us to “Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with perseverance” and “Finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6 : 18; 6 : 10-11). By prayer we essentially call on His Divine power and by His Grace we are deified and brought back to the road of excellence and redemption. As we can think and reason and have self-awareness or *gnosis* we can have a fellowship with God in a spiritual life given to us from above by the righteousness of God, through Jesus life and ministry. Believers need to be wise and they will then enjoy authentic living as they will have a needed fear of God and seek to obey His commands. Where Christian wisdom is absent there is relational conflict, and then there are unfulfilled dreams in a shattered world. The Church maintains that wisdom of the truth is available to people with humility and a desire to be taught by the Church, and especially love the Lord. It will be anathema for arrogant and narcissistic people to ask for wisdom.

Sadly, many Orthodox Christians view themselves as part of some or other ethnic entity, such as Russian, Greek, Ukrainian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Romanian, South Africa, Australian etc. They thus accept the “...world of individualism, pluralism, liberalism, and secularism (together with their accompanying values) as being their world. Church puts up with the values and the objectives of the Postmodern, but does not accept them in their totality...”. (Bigović, 2013)

The Church needs to take a firm stand as it has done since its inception, against all forms of evil inter alia materialism, moral decay, racism, sexism, social inequality and injustices, human rights abuses, and all forms of violence. Paul teaches us that “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being...for why is my liberty judged of another man’s conscience?” (I Corinthians 10:23-24, 29). Christ is the King of righteousness (Hebrews 7:2-3). He calls on us to abhor intolerance (Romans 12:10) and the Orthodox Church affirms that in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female: for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

To this end and other ends, the clerics and monks in the Orthodox Church seek to develop their knowledge of God, and grow in faithfulness as they study the Holy Bible, Holy Tradition and the Early Church Fathers to ascertain what is critical and to also model their lives on what they learn. Many nowadays have at least some degree in theology. Orthodox clerics all seek to operate out of a context of a prayerful life and deep spirituality and are intensely concerned for the unity and harmony of the people they lead and seek to bring outsiders into the holy family of God. They mostly seek to reflect the life of Christ, and bring honour to the church as they mirror Christ’s caring attitude and stimulate greater understanding of the church as a caring institution in society through their services and catechetical exercises.

The Apostle Paul stresses critical the need for all of humanity to return to God, “God has overlooked the days of ignorance, he now commands all men everywhere to repent.” The Church is thus called to take care of its flock as a loving shepherd will do. Orthodox Churches need to further embark on initiatives to promote greater ecumenical and inter-religious understanding and collaboration towards the furtherance of peaceful co-existence and amicable living together with diverse peoples in society (Heller, 2017). The Church should of



course not compromise its ethical principles and Orthodoxy values in any way at all. A person's dignity derives from being created in the image and likeness of God and also from each person's role in God's plan for humanity and also the world. St. Gregory the Theologian stressed that: "The Creator sets a sort of second world upon the earth, great in its smallness, another angel, a worshipper of composite nature, contemplator of visible creation, and initiate of intelligible creation, a king over all that is on earth... a living being, prepared here and transported elsewhere and (which is the culmination of the mystery) deified through attraction towards God" (Homily 45, On Holy Pascha, 7. PG 36, 632AB). In Matthew 5:9 we are all called to work with and serve all people with good intentions who seek peace and justice at each of the local, national and international levels. Sin is considered to be a spiritual malady which manifests itself in for example, in inter-alia deception, crime, corruption, and wars.

The Church seeks to help to eradicate pervasive sin in global society through its diverse roles and missions. It is also necessary for the different departments of theology faculties to emphasise more or to introduce more psychology/counselling studies for the future missionaries and priests, considering the rise of crime or GBV (gender-based violence) in parts of the world, for example African countries. It would not be surprising at all to see departments of forensic theology being established (about "forensic theology" see LeBlanc, 2005), in order to help civil authorities to prevent crime; besides the pastoral counselling of people residing in penitentiaries seems to be one of the vital tasks as well. The global reality, so to speak, is changing permanently and the Church needs to adapt its methods and strategies in more practical ways, related to so many particular unfortunate cases which can occur. We live, realistically speaking, in a sad world but with the certainty that it's been transformed through the presence of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Human sovereignty is only achievable through the sustenance of a loving and compassionate community and all atomistical and self-centred individuality is to be abhorred (Meyendorff, 1978). The Church needs to display reciprocal respect for the rights others and display great sensitivity towards indigenous religions and cultural relativism as it promotes the Gospel (Hierotheos, 1998). The Orthodox church needs to become unambiguous in its commitment to human rights issues and should speak its mind on this more regularly. The Orthodox Church is a catalyst of moral and spiritual encouragement and serves a great purpose in supporting the atonement of humanity with God (Theokritoff, 2010). St. Basil the Great posits: "Do not say, this one is a friend, a relative, a benefactor; that one is a stranger, a foreigner, an unknown man. If you do not see them as equals, you will receive no mercy. Nature is one; this one and the other are both men. Want is one, need is the same in both... Do not turn your brother away and make the stranger one of your own...for all are relatives, all brothers, all the offspring of one father". We need to especially help the downtrodden in society in a spirit of good neighbourliness. The Paraclete (Holy Spirit) bestows spiritual gifts on us when, in a contrite spirit of repentance, we search for God's peace and righteousness. Then peace and justice are displayed where we demonstrate faith, hope and charity towards all through Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 1:3).

Orthodox men as well as women, must forge create a society in which they both display the image of the divine calling that Christ calls us to. Woman also partakes in the divine image through man because she was fashioned out of him, and is his "glory." (1 Corinthians 11:7-8). We should also however remember that Jesus taught us to pray to 'Our Father'. Thus, men and women have equal but diverse roles as servants of God. Orthodoxy still needs to ask the central question about its discernment of the work of the Holy Spirit concerning women fulfilling their spiritual calling in any and every way conceivable (Kollontai, 2000).

The Orthodox Church recognises the ubiquitous presence of evil in the world at large as well as in individuals. However, it maintains that the Grace of God offers us the opportunity for





salvation once we live according to His Divine will and as such the Church expresses its faith with a stress on hermeneutics to share meanings relating to truth. It is clear that freedom makes all people capable of advancing towards total spiritual perfection but we are nonetheless tempted to disobedience through the prevalence of evil around us. The objective of all Orthodox theological and ethical teachings is to keep us on the straight and narrow path. We have the freedom to choose and have self-determination, (Gregory the Theologian, Homily 14, On Love for the Poor, 25. PG 35, 892A).

Bigović (2013) argues that: “The identity of the Church and the religious communities within the social-political processes needs to be recognizable and clearly articulated. It might perhaps be worthwhile considering the possibility that the Church and the religious communities should painstakingly and patiently construct a common social-political philosophy which would be on equal footing with other political ideas and programs.”

The teachings of the early Church Fathers and the liturgical spartan tradition in the Orthodox Church expresses huge concern for modern-day humanity. The Church is there to help resolve the vexing and stressful issues plaguing society today and it vigorously promotes the truth that the peace of God, surpasses all understanding (Philemon 4:7), and that all forms of reconciliation, support the notion of agape love prevailing in the world. The patriarchs of the Orthodox churches promote religious freedom and human rights, respect diversity and support all initiatives to safeguard the natural environment. All of humanity is called to seek *Theosis* through God’s grace (Nicolaidis, 2019). The Church strives for global peace to prevail in a spirit of love and justice and is prepared and willing to working together with all secular entities to face a range of challenges that manifest on a daily basis (Meyendorff, 1975). Orthodoxy acknowledges that God changes the times and seasons and He “...deposes kings and raises up others, He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning” (Daniel, 2:21).

## Conclusions

The chief objective of the Orthodox Church as a social phenomenon is to evangelize and Christianize society and by so doing atone a fallen humanity by role-modelling and teaching the desired life we ought to live. It must inherently contest all that threatens to diminish human dignity and liberty and take a stand against all corruption and vice in any form. The Church in all its guises offers manifold hope through Jesus Christ for an increasingly broken world. It came as no surprise at all, therefore, that we find in the English language the beautiful word “atonement”, which encapsulates, actually, all the essence and beauty of Christianity: Christ saved humanity, bringing it “at onement” with Himself, bringing reconciliation, and that was the very and unique defining moment (let’s think of “at one moment”) in History, its “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:5). It offers a haven to the downtrodden and the oppressed and promotes peace and tranquillity at every opportunity. She promotes Christian *agape* among all peoples of the world. However, we need to be cognisant that it is ultimately the peace from above that is desired, and which is attainable through atonement and a spiritual life in which prayer is a standard. “The foundation is laid already, and no one can lay another, for it is Jesus Christ himself” (1 Corinthians 3:11). When the Divine Eucharist is celebrated, it gathers (1 Corinthians 11:20) all of God’s people (Colossians 3:11). The ethos of the Orthodox has been and always will be, to care for all peoples in dire need, in all areas of life. She is never indifferent to the problems faced by humanity. She cares about the ecological calamity faced by the world linked to climate change and global warming and asserts that all of the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world, and those who dwell in her (Psalms 23:1). The Church calls on and stresses the need for responsible global leadership, and for a spirit of preserving God’s gift to us for future generations to enjoy, to permeate the daily activities and actions of all politicians and other leaders. Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14) and His peace surpasses all



understanding (Philippians 4:7). We need to observe the words that “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Ecumenism is very important as it serves to promote the notion of Christian unity, but this cannot be at any cost because the Church continues to seek “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report” (Philippians 4:8). The Gospel’s message continues to be respectfully disseminated far and wide as the Church strives to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19). Humanity is called to elevate its depth of intimacy with the triune Godhead as this will invariably elevate human understanding and save souls from self-destruction. The objective and objective of the Orthodox Church must first and foremost be to obtain the unity of all in Jesus Christ and the Holy Eucharist.

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