

The Eucharist as the Realisation of the Catholicity of the Church according to Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky

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Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky's theology can be defined as a return to the authentic roots of Orthodox Christianity, and as oriented towards the liturgical and ascetic experience of the Church, revealed through the *catholic mind* of the Fathers. In the 20th century, such a return was of vital importance to the Church due to the fact that Orthodox Christian theology had gone into decline after the fall of Byzantium. Moreover, Orthodox theology had itself rejected its liturgical and ascetic roots, adopting practices foreign to its tradition. Here are the words of Father Florovsky:

“After the fall of Byzantium only the West continued to elaborate theology. Although theology is in essence a catholic endeavour, it has been resolved only in schism. This is the basic paradox of the history of Christian culture. The West expounds theology while the East is silent, or what is still worse, the East thoughtlessly and belatedly repeats the lessons already learned in the West.”¹

This observation about the *Babylonian captivity* of Orthodox theology, as Florovsky himself defined that decline, made him

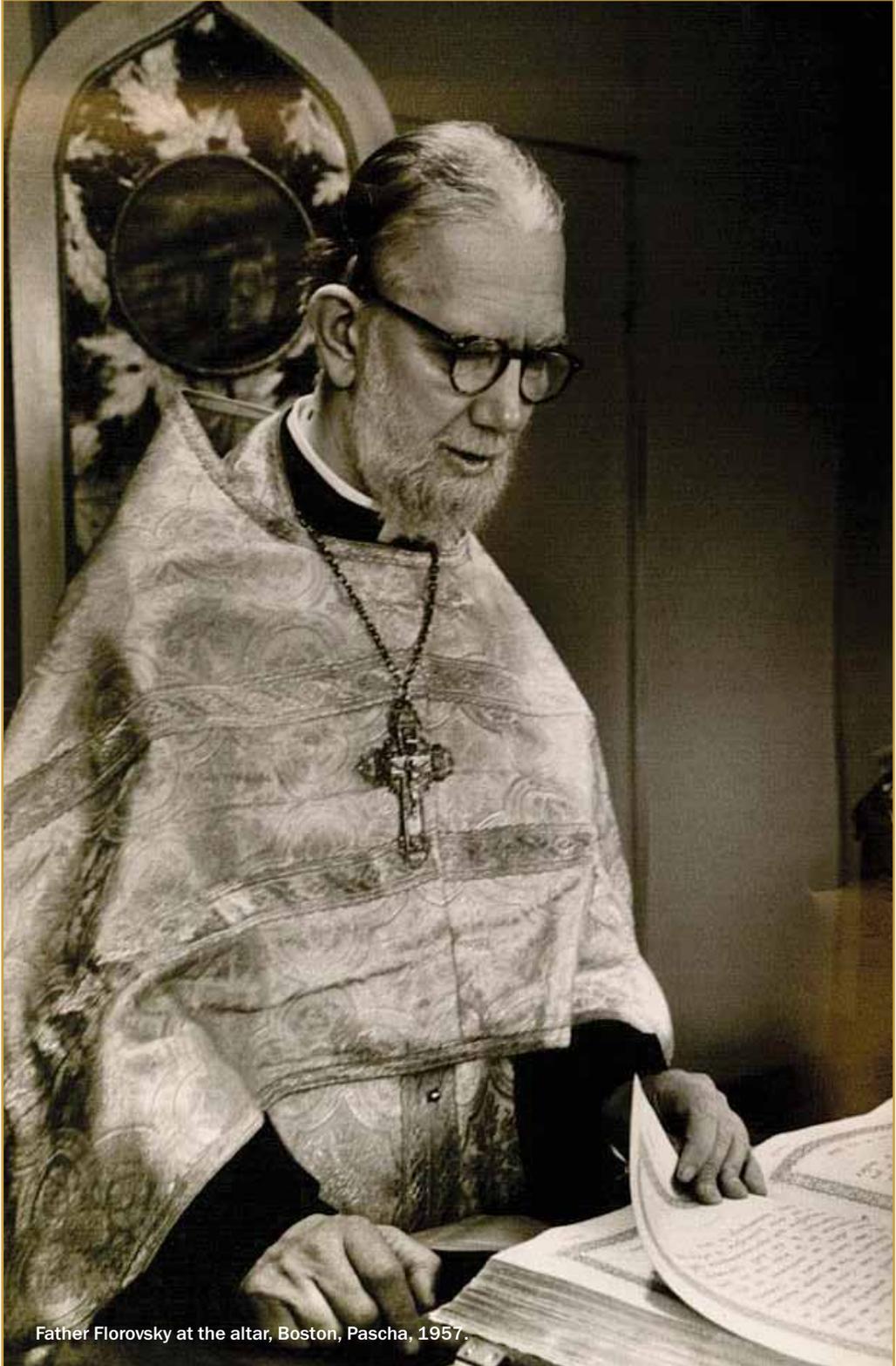
search for ways for the Eastern Christian theology to rediscover and revive the authentic liturgical and ascetic practice which had actually remained intact in the tradition, even at the time when theological thought, under the influence of Western scholasticism, underwent profound changes. He spoke of the *pseudomorphosis* of the old Orthodox theology (influenced by the West in the 15th-19th centuries), and considered the past as a time when there was no meditation on the sources of liturgical and ascetic theology; the Orthodox did not strive for it, nor had the potential for it, had the necessity arisen.

With his works, Father Georges Florovsky brings Orthodox theology back to its foundation which proceeds from the sacramental life of the Church with the Holy Eucharist at its centre. He attempts to reveal the catholic² nature of the Church through the reality of the Eucharist, which confirms this catholicity, in contrast to the institutionalism and legalism that prevailed at that time, and, to a certain degree, persist to this day.

Father Georges Florovsky follows Saint Paul's authentic ecclesiology which sees the Church as the *Body of Christ* (1 Cor. 12:27),

¹ Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology: Part Two*. Notable & Academic Books, 1987, p.303.

² The Greek term *καθολική Εκκλησία* is found in St Ignatius of Antioch (see p.5, 708-717) and other early fathers. *Catholicity* is not to be identified with universality as a geographical conception (as in Roman Catholicism), but is found in the Eucharist and means inner wholeness. (See 'The Catholicity of the Church', in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*. Vol. I, The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky. Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1972, pp.37-56.)



Father Florovsky at the altar, Boston, Pascha, 1957.

and the mystical image of the Body of Christ with its members presupposes catholicity and communion between them and their Head, Christ.

This type of ecclesiology is based on Christology, or rather it constitutes its natural continuation. According to Saint Paul, the Church is the Body of the Saviour, the body of the God-Man. This, in turn, means that the Church is this same Christ, Christ in body, and together with His body. Christ is the Head of the body of the Church, but also the Fullness – *το πλήρωμα* (Eph. 1:22-23). At the same time, He Himself as the Head and the Saviour of the body, and as the Saviour incarnate in man, is the Head and the Fullness of the body of the Church. In other words, ecclesiology is the very Christology, together with soteriology.³ Christology in Orthodoxy is also inseparable from Triadology; therefore, in this ecclesiology, through the Eucharist and catholicity, we find revealed the whole reality of the communion (*κοινωνία*) with the Holy Trinity.

In his article 'Eucharist and Catholicity', originally published in *Put*, vol 19 (Nov. 1929), Father Georges Florovsky emphasises:

“For us, the divided and isolated, this union in the image of the Trinity, Consubstantial and Undivided, is only possible in Christ, in His love, in the unity of His body, in the communion of His chalice. Mystically reflected in the unity of the catholic Church is the Trinitarian consubstantiality, and in the image of the Trinitarian consubstantiality and perichoresis of the divine life in the multitude of the faithful, they find themselves of one heart and one soul (cf Acts 4:32). And this unity and catholicity is known and realised by the Church above all in her Eucharistic celebration. The Church may be said to be essentially an image of the All-holy Trinity; therefore, the revelation of the Trinity is also

connected with the founding of the Church. And the Eucharistic communion is the fulfilment and consummation of the unity of the Church.”⁴

The passage cited above makes it clear that for Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky the catholicity of the Church proceeds from the Eucharist itself. This is why we can see here the beginning of a Eucharistic ecclesiology, revealing the Church as a Eucharistic event: an event in which we become communicants of both Christ Himself and each other. In this connection, Father Georges Florovsky writes:

“In the Holy Eucharist the faithful become the Body of Christ. Therefore, the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Church, ‘the sacrament of the assembly’ (μυστήριον συνάξεως), ‘the sacrament of the communion’ (μυστήριον κοινωνίας). The Eucharistic communion is not so much a spiritual or moral unity, not so much feelings and emotions. It is a real and ontological unity, the realisation of an organic life in Christ. This very image of the Body shows the organic continuity of life. In the faithful, according to the strength and the extent of their union with Christ, there is revealed the united divine-human life – in the communion of the sacrament, in the unity of the life-giving Spirit. The ancient Fathers did not hesitate to speak of ‘natural’ and ‘physical’ communion, which was a realistic way of explaining the gospel image of the Vine and the branches (John 15:5).”⁵

These ancient Fathers, who spoke of the mystical yet real union of the faithful with Christ in the Holy Eucharist, were the Church mystics Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas, Saint John Chrysostom (the greatest interpreter of

³ Bishop Atanasije Jevtić, *Pravoslavje i ekumenizam*. Beograd: Hrišćanski kulturni centar, 2005, pp.181-185.

⁴ Georges Florovsky, 'Evaristija i sabornost', in Bishop Atanasije Jevtić, *Bojanstvena Liturgija*, Vol. II. Beograd-Trebinje, 2007, p.456.

⁵ Ibid.

Saint Paul's ecclesiology), Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Saint Cyprian of Carthage, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, and Saint John of Damascus. In the same article, Father Georges includes many quotations from them while following and analysing the text of the Eucharistic Canon of the Divine Liturgy, thereby revealing the authentic teaching about the Eucharist as the foundation of the catholicity of the Church.

He asserts that the catholic character of the Church, proceeding from the Eucharist, is so all-embracing also because of the fact that each church community – no matter how small – possesses the Fullness of the whole Church: *“In the Eucharist, invisibly but really there is revealed the Fullness of the Church. Every liturgy is celebrated in connection with and on behalf of the whole Church, not only on behalf of the people present – in the same way as the celebrant has power to celebrate the mystery by virtue of the apostolic succession – and thus by the apostles and by the whole Church, and so – by Christ Himself. Because every ... ‘small Church’ is not only part, but also a concentrated image of the whole Church, inseparable from her unity and Fullness. This is why at every Liturgy, mystically but really the whole Church is present and concelebrates. The liturgical celebration is a constantly renewed theophany in which we contemplate the God-Man Christ as the founder and Head of the Church, and with Him – the whole Church. In the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church contemplates and is aware of herself as the unified and whole body of Christ.”*⁶

We can see from these words that catholicity is only possible in the Eucharist. Georges Florovsky writes further that in the Eucharist, through the prayer of memorial (anamnesis), we are united not only with Christ, but also with the angelic orders, the departed, those absent from the Eucharistic

assembly for some reason, with the whole Church, and this memorial is not abstract, but personal, that is, it can be called *Eucharistic-personal*. All this is only possible in Christ: *“In the (Eucharistic) prayers, the Church seeks to mention all her members by name, the glorified and the weak, the living and the departed. It is in this remembering of all for whom the people in the Church must and want to pray that the principle of person is sanctified and confirmed. The Eucharistic mentioning of the living and the departed means the confirming of each individuality in the unified and catholic body of the Church.”*⁷

With this, Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky reveals the fact that outside the eucharistic community the realisation of the person is impossible, and it is there that its confirmation and life take place. Catholicity itself cannot be the sum of anonymous individuals, but is the sum of persons participating in the communion with each other and with the Persons in the Holy Trinity. Father Georges Florovsky shifts the focus of Orthodox theology towards a new theology, which would be developed later and become a constituent part of Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov's and of Metropolitan John Zizioulas' theology of person.⁸

It can be clearly seen from what has been said so far that Georges Florovsky's contribution to the Orthodox theology of the 20th century was enormous, what is more – his whole theology had to do with the rediscovery of and living participation of Christians in the liturgical life of the Church.

Defining the *Eucharist as the heart of the Church*,⁹ Father Georges Florovsky lays emphasis on it as the centre, the source of each community, and on the community itself being conscious of itself as the Church.

These beginnings of eucharistic ecclesiology were developed in parallel by

⁶ Ibid., p.459.

⁷ Ibid., p.457.

⁸ See John Zizioulas, 'Personhood and Being', in *Being as Communion*. Crestwood: SVS Press, 1993; John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*. NY: T&T Clark, 2006.

⁹ 'The Eucharist and Redemption', in *Creation and Redemption*. Vol. III, The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky. Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1976, p.156.

his student and colleague from the Institut Saint-Serge in Paris, Protopresbyter Nicholas Afanasiev (1893-1966). Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann built upon the eucharistic ecclesiology of both of them, while the latest contribution has been made by the present Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas,¹⁰ and by Protopresbyter Nikolaos Loudovikos.¹¹

Father Georges Florovsky's theology remains to this day invaluable and necessary due to the fact that scholastic theology, individualism, pietism, formalism, and ethnophyletism, which are suffocating the Church, have not yet been pulled up by the roots. They are joined, however, by the Church's greatest enemy – militant secularism, exerting influence from outside, but most of all from inside the Church, destroying her very being through her own members.

This is how Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky describes it: *“The Liturgy has lost its central place in the personal life of the faithful. This is the result of the increasing secularism of the faithful. The ‘personal’ has degenerated into ‘private’. The catholic gathering for the common liturgical worship has been lost, or has been replaced with a kind of pietism and aesthetic individualism. It is always the priesthood that has been responsible for that neglect. An obvious division between dogmatic teaching and pious practice has occurred, a kind of ‘godly’ psychologism ... The holy sacraments lose their influence over the whole of life when ‘godliness’ is separated from the dogma (the teaching of the Church). In reality, the Holy Mysteries are part and rule (norms) of the dogmas, that is, of doctrine. The increase in emotionalism (pietism or psychologism) is always detrimental to the true sacramental balance in the Church.”*¹²

It becomes clear that without the Eucharist and its catholicity, spiritual

life is reduced to pietism, and is nothing but individualistic moralism, symbolism, sentimental psychologism, and sensuality. Once excluded, it begins to be only understood as one of the seven sacraments, and constitutes solely an act of individual spiritual perfection and salvation. This incorrect post-scholastic conception of the Eucharist is in itself the destruction of catholicity, and reveals itself as a real ecclesiological heresy.¹³

Longing for the healing of the community, Father Georges Florovsky writes that in the Eucharistic catholicity, *“the ‘we’ of prayer signifies not so much plurality, but first and foremost the spiritual unity of the standing Church, the inseparable catholicity of the presentation in prayer ... The prayer of the faithful should be a ‘symphonic’ prayer, it should be offered ‘with one mouth and one heart.’ And not in such a manner that it should simply consist of their private, personal, and separate prayers, but so that each individual prayer should be freed of its personal limitation, stop being personal only, and become common and catholic. In other words, this means that each person should not pray on his own account, but precisely as a member of the Church, perceiving and being aware of himself as a member of the same Church body.”*¹⁴ Without such an understanding, there can be no authentic life in Christ. The Church should be lived as a community of free persons, confirming herself as the body of Christ – a body glorified and healed of sin and death by the Lord's Resurrection, a body of which we, the divided, become partakers and take as *φάρμακον θανατοῦ*.¹⁵

This reveals to us that it is only in the Eucharist that we confirm ourselves and live truly. In the Eucharist we anticipate the time when catholicity will be realised in Christ being *all and in all* (Col. 3:11). ■

¹⁰ Karl Christian Felmy, 'Die eucharistische Ekklesiologie', in *Einführung in die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Lit, 2011, pp.198-216.

¹¹ Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010.

¹² Georgije Florovsky, 'Elementi liturgije', in *O Liturgji: Zbornik tekstova*. Beograd, 1997, p.204.

¹³ Svilen Toutekov, 'Pravoslavnoto bogoslovie i nasledstvoto na pietizma', in *Lichnost, obshtnost, drugost*. Veliko Tarnovo: Sintagma, 2009, pp.242-266.

¹⁴ Georges Florovsky, 'Evharistija i sabornost', op. cit., p.457.

¹⁵ 'A remedy bestowing immortality', according to the expression of St Ignatius of Antioch.