

The Church as the Body of Christ

by St. John Maximovitch

"And He (Christ) is the of the body, the church (Col.1:18), "which is His body, the Fulness of Him the that Filleth all in all (Eph. 1:23)

In the Holy Scriptures the Church is repeatedly called the Body of Christ."Who (Paul) now rejoice in my sufferings for you, ... for His Body's sake, which is the Church (Col. 1:24), the Apostle Paul writes about himself.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, says he, are given by Christ ". . .for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12).

At the same time, bread and wine are made into the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy, and the faithful partake thereof. Christ Himself ordained it so, communicating His apostles at the Mystical Supper with the words, "Take, eat; this is My Body; ... Drink ye all of it; For this is My Blood of the New Testament" (Mat. 26:26-28).

How is the Body of Christ at the same time both the Church and the Holy Mystery? Are the faithful both members of the Body of Christ, the Church, and also communicants of the Body of Christ in the Holy Mysteries?

In neither instance is this name "Body of Christ" used metaphorically, but rather in the most basic sense of the word. We believe that the Holy Mysteries which keep the form of bread and wine are the very Body and the very Blood of Christ. We likewise believe and confess that Christ is the Son of the Living God, come into the world to save sinners, and become true man, that His flesh, taken from the Virgin Mary, was true human flesh; that body and soul. Christ was a true man, in all respects like man, except sin, and at the same time remaining true God. The Divine nature was neither diminished nor changed in the Son of God in this incarnation, likewise the human nature was not changed at this incarnation, but retained in full all human qualities.

Unchanged and unconfused forever, indivisibly and inseparably Godhead and manhood were united in the One Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Son of God became incarnate to make people partakers of the divine nature (II Peter- 1:4), to free them from sin and death, and to make them immortals.

Uniting ourselves with Christ, we receive divine grace which gives human nature strength for victory over sin and death, and the Lord Jesus Christ has shown people the way to victory over sin by His teaching, and he grants them eternal life, making them partakers of His eternal kingdom by His Resurrection. In order to receive that divine grace from Him the closest possible contact with Him is necessary. Drawing all to Himself by His divine love, and uniting them unto Himself, the Lord has united to each other those who love Him and come unto Him, uniting them into one Church.

The Church is unity in Christ, the closest union with Christ of all who rightly believe on Him and love Him, and all their union is through Christ.

Now the Church consists of both her earthly and heavenly parts, for the Son of God came to earth and became man that He might lead man into heaven and make him once again a citizen of paradise, returning to him his original condition of sinlessness and wholeness and uniting him unto Himself. This is accomplished by the action of divine grace granted through the Church, but effort is also required from man himself. God saves His fallen creature by His own love for him, but man's love for his Creator is also necessary and without it salvation is impossible for him. Striving toward God and cleaving unto the Lord by its humble love, the human soul obtains power to cleanse itself from sin and to strengthen itself for the struggle to full victory over sin.

And the body partakes in that struggle, being now the vehicle and instrument of sin, but fore-ordained to be the instrument of righteousness and the vessel of holiness. God created man, breathing divine breath into the animate body created earlier from the earth. The body was to have been an instrument of the spirit, subject to God, for through it the human spirit manifests itself in the material world. The spirit reveals its properties and qualities through the body and its separate members which God gave it, as to His own image, because the body as a manifestation of the image of God both is called and very truly is "our beauty created in the image of God" (sticheron from the Funeral Service).

When the first-created people fell away in spirit from their Creator, the body, hitherto subject to the spirit and obtaining its directions through the soul, ceased to be subordinate to it and began to strive to dominate it. In place of the law of God the law of the flesh began to rule man. Sin, having cut man off from God, the source of life, has rent man himself asunder, violated union of spirit, soul and body, and death has entered into him. The soul, not surrounded now by the streams of life, could no longer transmit them to the body which became corruptible, and languor became the lot of the soul. Christ came to earth to restore anew the fallen image and return it to union with Him Whose image it is. Uniting man unto Himself, God thus restores him to his original goodness in all its fullness Granting grace and sanctification to the spirit, Christ also purifies, strengthens, heals and sanctifies the spirit and the body.

'But he that is joined unto the Lord is one Spirit (with him) ' (I Cor. 6:17). The body, then, of the man who has been united unto the Lord must be an instrument of the Lord, must serve for the fulfillment of His will, and become a part of the Body of Christ.

For the full sanctification of man, the body of the servant of the Lord must be united with the Body of Christ, and this is accomplished in the mystery of Holy Communion. The true Body and the true Blood of Christ which we receive, becomes a part of the great Body of Christ.

Of course, for union with Christ, the mere conjoining of our body with the Body of Christ does not suffice. The consumption of the Body of Christ becomes beneficial when in spirit we strive toward Him and unite ourselves with Him. Reception of the Body of Christ, with aversion to Him in spirit, is like the approach to Christ of those who struck Him and mocked and crucified Him. Their approaching Him served not for their salvation and healing, but for their condemnation.

But those who partake with piety, love and readiness to bring themselves to serve Him, closely unite themselves with Him and become instruments of His divine will.

"He that eateth My Flesh and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him," said the Lord (John 6:56).

Uniting with the Risen Lord and through Him with the entire eternal Trinity, man draws from It power for eternal life and does himself become immortal.

"As the living Father hath sent Me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth Me even he shall live by Me " (John 6:57).

All who believe in Christ and are united unto Him by giving themselves to Him and by the reception of divine grace conjointly constitute the Church of Christ, the Head of which is Christ Himself, and they who enter into her are her members.

Christ, invisible to the bodily eye, manifests Himself on earth clearly through His Church just as the unseen human spirit manifests itself through its body. The Church is the Body of Christ both because its parts are united to Christ through His divine mysteries and because through her Christ works in the world.

We partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, in the holy Mysteries, so that we ourselves may be members of Christ's Body: the Church.

This is not accomplished instantly. Fully abiding in the Church is already victory over sin and complete purification therefrom. To some degree everything sinful estranges us from the Church and keeps us out of the Church; this is why in the prayer read at confession over every penitent we have the phrase: "reconcile, and unite unto Thy Holy Church. " Through repentance a Christian is cleansed and united closely to Christ in partaking of the Holy Mysteries, but later the grime of sin again settles upon him and estranges him from Christ and the Church, and therefore repentance and communion are again necessary. As long as the earthly life of a man endures, up to the very departure of the soul from the body, the struggle between sin and righteousness goes on within him. However high a spiritual and moral state one might achieve, a gradual, or even headlong and deep fall into the abyss of sin is always possible. Therefore, communion of the holy Body and Blood of Christ, which strengthens our contact with Him and refreshes us with the living streams of the grace of the Holy Spirit flowing through the Body of the Church, is necessary for everyone. How very important communion of the Holy Mysteries is we see from the life of St. Onuphrius the Great to whom, as well as to other hermits dwelling in the same desert, angels brought Holy Communion; and in the life of St. Mary of Egypt we read that her final wish after many years of desert life was the reception of the Holy Mysteries. The lives of St. Sabbatius of Solovki and a multitude of others tell us similar things. Not in vain did the Lord speak and say: "Amen, amen, I say unto you, except ye eat the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His Blood, ye have no life in you" 6:23).

To partake of the Body and Blood of Christ is to receive in oneself the Risen Christ, the victor over death, granting to those with Him victory over sin and death.

Preserving in ourselves the grace-filled gift of Communion, we have a guarantee and foretaste of the blessed, eternal life of the soul and body.

Up to the very "Day of Christ, " His Second Coming and the Judgment of the whole world, the struggle of sin with righteousness will continue, individually in each person and collectively in all mankind. The earthly Church unites all who are reborn through baptism and who have taken up the cross of the struggle with sin, and who follow after Christ the contest-master of this struggle. The Divine Eucharist, the offering of the bloodless sacrifice and partaking thereof, sanctifies and strengthens its partakers and makes those who receive of the Body and Blood of Christ true members of His Body, the Church. But only with death is it determined whether a man remained a true member of the Body of Christ to his last breath, or whether sin has triumphed in him and driven out the grace binding him to Christ and received by him in the Holy Mysteries.

He who as a member of the earthly Church has reposed in grace goes over from the earthly Church into the heavenly Church; but he who has fallen away from the earthly Church will not enter into the heavenly, for the Church in this world is the way into the heavenly. The more one is found to be under the influence of the grace of communion and the more tightly one has united himself to Christ, the more one will find pleasure in communion with Christ and in His coming Kingdom.

Therefore, it is important to partake of the Mysteries of Christ just before death, when the lot of a man is determined forever. It is necessary to try to receive just before death, if there be even the smallest possibility of this to beseech the Lord to find us worthy of this and to take thought for others, so that they may not be deprived of Communion before the end.

Inasmuch as sin continues to operate in the soul until death, so the body is liable to the consequences and bears in itself the seeds of disease and death from which it is freed only when it decays after death, and then rises at last free of them in the general resurrection. He who unites himself in spirit and in body with Christ in this life will be with him in spirit and in body in the life to come. The grace-filled streams of the life-creating Mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ are the well-spring of our eternal joy in converse with the risen Christ and in the contemplation of His glory.

The same consequences of sin, not yet driven out finally from the human race, operate not only in individual people, but through them they are manifested in the earthly activity of entire sections of the Church. Heresies, Heresies, and disputes arise constantly, tearing away part of the faithful. Misunderstandings between local churches or parts of them have troubled the Church since antiquity, and prayers for their cessation are constantly heard in the divine services.

"We pray for the unity of the churches," "unity to the churches" (Resurrection canon, Triadic, Tone 8), "dissensions of the Church set aright" (Service to the Archangels, 8 November, 26 March, 13 July) and similar prayers in the course of centuries have been offered by the Orthodox Church. Even on Holy and Great Saturday before the Epitaphion of Christ, the Church pronounces: "O most blameless, pure Virgin who didst bring forth the Life, stop the scandals of the Church, and grant peace as thou art good" (last verse of the stasis of the Lamentations).

Only when Christ appears on the clouds will the tempter be trampled down, and all scandals and temptations disappear.

At that time the struggle between good and evil, between life and death will cease, and the earthly Church will merge with the Church Triumphant in which God will be all in all (I Cor. 15:28).

In the Kingdom of Christ to come, there will no longer be need for receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, for all who have been vouchsafed it will be in closest converse with Him and will enjoy the pre-eternal light of the Life originating Trinity, experiencing that blessedness which no tongue can express, and which is incomprehensible to our feeble mind. For this reason after partaking of the Holy Mysteries at Liturgy, in the altar is always pronounced the prayer which we sing on Paschal days: "O Christ, Thou great and most sacred Pascha! O Wisdom, Word and Power of God! Grant us to partake of Thee more fully in the unwaning day of Thy kingdom" (Paschal Canon, 9th Ode).