

What is the Church? (Panteleïmon Tomazos)

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What is the Church? How do we define it? The Church and life are hard to define, because what's defined is confined. The Church can be described only through the language of images, such as a vine, the body of Christ or the flock of rational sheep. When we here the word 'Church', an image of the clergy often comes to mind, automatically and instinctively. Consciously or unconsciously we privately equate the Church with bishops and clergy while at the same time accepting an inferior role for the people, who are under the dominant authority of the priest or leaders. Those who accept these confused notions don't realize that they're the product of Western theology and are far removed from our Orthodox tradition. For Orthodox tradition, any such separation between clergy and laity into two classes within the one, indivisible Church is unthinkable. The Church doesn't consist of the clergy alone, nor the laity alone, but rather both groups are joined and united in one body with the Lord Jesus Christ as its head.



The Church isn't an organization, an association for religiously-minded people, a group of people with metaphysical interests, a sect of the chosen who, at some time in the future will rejoice over the perdition of those condemned to hell, nor is it a social club aimed at material contentment and good works. The Church is the communion of rational and intelligent beings with God, the body of those who accept the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. Saint Maximos the Confessor writes that 'the Church is the type and image of God, since it has the same task as Him'[1]. Just as God puts together all the elements in nature and holds them together, creating a world of complete harmony and incomparable beauty, so the Church unifies countless numbers of people under the gaze of the Almighty. The unity and peace offered by God are based on faith. 'In this way all people are united and grow together in the simple and indivisible grace of faith'[2]. The Church is actual communion between God and us, not an institution, a means that leads to participation in God. Of course, the Church does have its institutional side, but this is not all it is.

The Church is one, it's catholic and it's apostolic, which means that it has its roots in the manifestations and revelations of the Holy Trinity. 'The Church is creation itself'[3], which means that God is known only within the creation and history, because it's there that He's revealed. It's impossible for people to overcome the limitations of their created nature and to be drawn upwards into supramundane

and supracelestial spheres. First, God comes to the world, then human beings turn to Him through their free will. So since there's one reality, one creation, it follows that there's one Church. Theologically it's unacceptable to say that there are many Churches which conceive of God in different ways. Acceptance of many Churches would mean acceptance of multiple realities, which is nonsensical, impious and absurd. The truth always has priority, not its representation or interpretation. Salvation is to be found only within the Church; that is, only when we follow the Church's way of life are we saved. In this way, people who don't know Christ, but follow the Christian path of love will be judged in accordance with their conscience and will be saved.

There are some contemporary theologians who, under the pretence of interest in the salvation of the whole world, characterize Churches as aberrations of Christianity (the thousands of Protestant offshoots and confessions, and Roman Catholicism). They're unable to understand the fact that the Church is reality itself—the creation, the relationship and communion between the triune God and humankind. It's not the acceptance of some abstract, transcendental, divine and holy being with whom we're called upon to enter into communion through a variety of ways and means. We should note that the exclusivity of the truth is the equivalent to acceptance of the one, sole Church. All Christian confessions have a form of institutional organization, but that doesn't make them Churches. Only those people who identify the Church with the clergy and with administrative (not charismatic) authority in general are able to accept the existence of many 'Churches'.

[1] Maximos the Confessor, Μυσταγωγία, PG 91, 664D

[2] Ibid 668A.

[3] Ibid p. 259.