

## Baptismal Theology

*by Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Navpaktos and Hagios Vlasios*

THERE HAS BEEN in the past, and there is in our own day, a good deal of discussion about the Baptism of heretics (the heterodox [1]); that is, whether heretics who have deviated from the Orthodox Faith and who seek to return to it should be Baptized anew or simply Chrismated after making a profession of faith. Decisions have been issued on this matter by both local and Œcumenical Synods.

In the text that follows, I should like to discuss, by way of example, the agreement reached between the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of America and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in America [2] on June 3, 1999. The Greek translation of the original text was made by Protopresbyter George Dragas, a professor at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston [Brookline—Trans.], who also provided a summary and critique of this agreed statement between Orthodox and Roman Catholics in America.

The basis of this document is the Balamand Agreement of 1993, "Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past and the Present Search for Full Communion," which it evidently wishes to uphold.

The text on which we are commenting, that is, the agreement signed by Orthodox and Roman Catholics in America and entitled "Baptism and 'Sacramental Economy,'" is based on several points, in my observation, that are very typical of the contemporary ecumenical movement and indicative of its entire substance.

The first point is that "Baptism rests upon and derives its reality from the faith of Christ Himself, the faith of the Church, and the faith of the believer" (p. 13). At first sight, one is struck by the absence, here, of any reference to the Triune God—perhaps in order to justify this flexible interpretation of Baptism. Faith, then, becomes the fundamental mark and element of Baptism.

The second point is that Baptism is not a practice required by the Church, but is, "rather, the Church's foundation. It establishes the Church" (p. 26). Here, the notion that Baptism is not the "initiatory" Mystery whereby we are introduced into the Church, but the foundation of the Church, is presented as the truth.

The third point is that "Baptism was never understood as a private ceremony, but rather as a corporate event" (p. 13). This means that the Baptism of catechumens was "the occasion for the whole community's repentance and renewal" (p. 13). One who is Baptized "is obliged to make his own the community's common faith in the Savior's person and promises" (p. 14).

The fourth point is a continuation and consequence of the foregoing points. Since Baptism rests upon faith in Christ, since it is the basis of the Church, and since, moreover, it is the work of the community, this means that any recognition of Baptism entails recognition of the

Church in which the Baptism is performed. In the Agreed Statement we read: "The Orthodox and Catholic members of our Consultation acknowledge, in both of our traditions, a common teaching and a common faith in one baptism, despite some variations in practice which, we believe, do not affect the substance of the mystery" (p. 17).

According to this text, there is a common faith and teaching concerning Baptism in the two "Churches," and the differences that exist do not affect the substance of the Mystery. The two sides each acknowledge an ecclesial reality "in the other, however much they may regard their way of living the Church's reality as flawed or incomplete" (p. 17). "The certain basis for the modern use of the phrase 'sister churches'" (p. 17) is to be found in this point. The Orthodox Church and the Latin Church are these two "sister Churches," because they have the same Tradition, the same Faith, and the same Baptism, even though there are certain differences between them. Hence, the following opinion is repeatedly affirmed in the text: "We find that this mutual recognition of the ecclesial reality of baptism, in spite of our divisions, is fully consistent with the perennial teaching of both churches" (p. 26). Misinterpreting the teaching of St. Basil the Great, the signers of this document aver that the two "Churches," in spite of the "imperfections" that exist, constitute the same ecclesial reality: "By God's gift we are each, in St. Basil's words, 'of the Church'" (p. 26).

The fifth point is that the authors of the Agreed Statement find fault with St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, who, in interpreting the views of St. Cyprian of Carthage, St. Basil the Great, and the Second Œcumenical Synod, talks—as do all of the Kollyvades Fathers of the eighteenth century—about exactitude (*akribia*) and economy (*oikonomia*) with regard to the way in which heretics are received into the Orthodox Church. That is to say, the Fathers have at times received heretics by exactitude—namely, by Baptism—and at times by economy—namely, by Chrismation. However, even when the Church does receive someone by economy, this means that She effects the mystery of salvation at that very time, precisely because the Church is superior to the Canons, and not the Canons to the Church, and because the Church is the source of the Mysteries and, *eo ipso*, of Baptism, whereas Baptism is not the basis of the Church. The Church can receive this or that heretic by the principle of economy, without any implication that She recognizes as a Church the community that previously baptized him. This is the context within which St. Nicodemos interprets the relevant decision of the Second Œcumenical Synod.

Confusion is certainly heightened by the fact that one of the recommendations of the Agreed Statement is subject to many different interpretations. According to this recommendation, the two Churches should make it clear that "the mutual recognition of baptism does not of itself resolve the issues that divide them, or reestablish full ecclesial communion between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, but that it does remove a fundamental obstacle on the path towards full communion" (p. 28).

From this brief analysis, it is obvious how much confusion prevails in ecumenist circles regarding these issues. It is also obvious that [Orthodox] ecumenists understand the acceptance of the baptism of heretics (Catholics and Protestants, who have altered the dogma of the Holy Trinity and other dogmas) to mean accepting the ecclesial status of heretical

bodies and, worse still, that the two “Churches,” Latin and Orthodox, are united in spite of “small” differences, or that we derive from the same Church and should seek to return to it, thereby forming the one and only Church. This is a blatant expression of the branch theory.

When there is such confusion, it is necessary to adopt an attitude of strictness, which preserves the truth: that all who fall into heresy are outside the Church and that the Holy Spirit does not work to bring about their deification.

In any event, baptismal theology creates immense problems for the Orthodox. From the standpoint of ecclesiology, the text under consideration is riddled with errors. The Patristic Orthodox teaching on this subject is that the Church is the Theanthropic Body of Christ, in which revealed truth—the Orthodox Faith—is preserved and the mystery of deification is accomplished through the Mysteries of the Church (Baptism, Chrismation, and the Divine Eucharist). The essential precondition for this is that we participate in the purifying, illuminating, and deifying energy of God. Baptism is the initiatory Mystery of the Church. The Church does not rest upon the Mystery of Baptism; rather, the Baptism of water, in conjunction with the Baptism of the Spirit, operates within the Church and makes one a member of the Body of Christ. There are no Mysteries outside the Church, the living Body of Christ, just as there are no senses outside the human body.

In closing, I should like to cite the conclusion of Father George Dragas, which he appends to his “Summary and Critique”:

These recommendations will not win the agreement of all Orthodox, and certainly not of those who are Greek-speaking (or Greek-minded), and consequently they are, by their very nature, divisive. My primary reason for coming to such a negative conclusion is that this inquiry into sacramental theology is devoid of any ecclesiological basis and that it onesidedly interprets—or rather, misinterprets—the facts of Orthodox sacramental practice, and particularly vis-à-vis the heterodox at different periods in the history of the Church. These recommendations and conclusions and, indeed, the entire Agreed Statement are the epitome of Western skepticism. Their acceptance by Orthodox theologians signals a deliberate betrayal of Orthodox views and a capitulation to the outlook of Western ecumenism. This is something that we should reject.

#### Endnotes

1. We have retained, here, for the sake of faithful translation, the word “heretic,” though with some concern that many readers may assume that it carries with it the vitriol that has been attached to it in Western Christianity—and especially since the Inquisition—or by some of the more irresponsible and less reflective and spiritually-enlightened Orthodox traditionalists, today. We could have justifiably used the word “heterodox,” which is not frequently used as an ad hominem epithet, as the word “heretic” so frequently is, but which simply indicates what both words actually mean: a person who holds to views that deviate from established belief

and, in the Orthodox Church, who accepts an opinion held in opposition to the Patristic consensus and the conscience of the Church. The word takes on wholly pejorative meanings, in the Orthodox Church, only when applied to those who, in their absolute intransigence, fail to succumb to the entreaties of the Church (and to spiritual sobriety), in the face their of error, and thus cause harm to the harmonious ethos of Orthodoxy and lead others into error and delusion—Trans.

2. To be precise, the agreement in question was signed by members of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, meeting at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in Crestwood, New York—Trans.

Translated from the Greek original in *Ekklesiastike Parembase*, No. 71 (December 2001), p. 12.  
Reprinted from *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol XX, No 2, pp. 40-43.