

EUCHARISTIC HOSPITALITY

AN ORTHODOX THEOLOGIAN'S ADMISSION OF FAILURE IN SEEKING TO COME TO TERMS WITH IT

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An Oriental Orthodox theologian has great difficulty coming to terms with one of the new ecumenical slogans "Eucharistic Hospitality." It does not certainly occur in the ancient tradition of the Church. Even in the western church, it is a new concept.

I am not quite sure about its meaning. I presume that it refers to the custom of the Roman Catholic Church which does not normally offer communion in the Holy Mass to non-Catholics, making a special dispensation during an ecumenical conference or other occasion and offering communion to those to whom it normally refuses communion. This could in theory be done also by other churches practising "closed communion", for example, the Lutherans or the Orthodox.

The puzzling questions for an Oriental Orthodox theologian are two: (a) "Who is this generous host being so hospitable?" and (b) "What is the host offering and to whom?"

The Eucharist, as the Orthodox understand it is the Sacrifice of Thanksgiving offered up to God, by the Church, in Christ, on behalf of the whole creation. Since the Church is offering it to God, the question of hospitality does not arise at that point. As far as offering communion to those who are not in communion, we do not think of the Eucharist as a kind of feast for the invited, to which the Church can hospitably invite some more people. It is the Church which offers itself to God through the bread and the wine, and God in turn offers Himself to us through the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no hospitality question in administering the holy mysteries of the Church which the West calls sacraments.

The question of hospitality does not arise anywhere in that process. The Church is not withholding something from other people, which it then gives to them in a gust of hospitality. In fact the term hospitality is quite offensive to us in this context, since it implies that those who do not do what some western churches are now doing are being downright inhospitable. I personally feel offended by that implication and therefore by the term "Eucharistic hospitality", which should be expunged from the ecumenical vocabulary for the sake of good relations.

The Orthodox have a principle of *oikonomia* or economy, which permits the canonical authorities to make exceptions to rules where such exception becomes pastorally necessary. But neither the term inter-communion nor the expression Eucharistic hospitality make any

theological sense to the Orthodox. In its place the Orthodox would use the terms Communion and Economy, which for them make better theological sense.

So far I do not know of any instance in which the Orthodox have invoked the principle of economy to give communion to non-Orthodox in ecumenical meetings. Theoretically this seems possible, if the pastoral need was felt to be compelling. The principle of economy is usually used in situations of emergency, and a conference does not seem to be a situation of emergency. Economy is used usually in relation to persons rather than to groups, though there may be instances in which the principle is extended to groups as well.

Since I have not yet seen a positive argument for the term Eucharistic hospitality, I can only confess failure in coming to terms with it. I shall of course be grateful for any further enlightenment on the subject.