

Biblical-Theological Reflections

THE PARISH AS A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNION IN LOVE

We read in the Acts of the Apostles: All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need (Ac. 2: 44-45). A little later we read that this is confirmed by the words: The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. (Ac. 4: 32)

We are always impressed by the example of early Christian Church and how the members turned their belongings over to the apostles for the use and common good of entire community. In contrast to Marxism and other modern “humanitarian” or “progressive” ideologies, the Christian community was never forced to do this, but freely and joyfully offered whatever they had. A good example for us is St. Vladimir the Great, who followed this historic tradition by donating one tenth of his wealth for the construction of a church dedicated to the Blessed Mother (*Theotokos*), called the *Desyatenytsya* or “Church of the Tithes”.

An understanding of the concept of “communion of (in) life” of the Early Church cannot be limited to material possessions. That which was entrusted to the apostles was symbolic of an even greater unity, found in the expression “to be of one hear and one soul”. It goes without saying that the greatest expression of unity in the early church was the “breaking of bread”, or the “breaking of bread in homes”, as we have mentioned. But here we want to draw attention of that which believing Christians from the very beginning, considered their possession as gifts received from God, and that is why they were ready to give to their community all those goods which came “from above”. the basis of this thought is the realization that as a consequence of their baptism, Christians became the children of God, an as such inheritors of eternal goods; that Jesus Christ enables us to have a relationship with God, and that we have the right to call Him our Father, our “Daddy” and as such we are all brother and sisters, we comprise one spiritual family!

At one point in the Divine Liturgy, the priest exclaims: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.” (see: 2 Cor. 13: 13). The word “fellowship” is a translation of the Greek word *κοινωνία*, (*koinonia*) which means the same as “unity”, “solidarity”, “agreement” and “community life”. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ – we are in union (fellowship) with God and with my brothers and sisters in Christ. When we pray together, work together, when together we witness the work of God in our lives, this is also “*koinonia*” – fellowship. To be a member of the Church is to be in fellowship (communion) with the Holy Spirit, and in the grace of Our Lord Jesus, and the God the Father.

The Eastern Church fathers frequently mention that everything we are as a Church is a mystical reflection of the life of the Blessed Trinity. We believe in God – Who is One, and at the same time Who is also in Community – “*koinonia*”- the Father Son and Holy Spirit. Everything that can be said about the love of the Christian community is also based on our understanding of the Blessed Trinity: God is Love and a Community in a Communion (relationship) of Love, and that is why the main characteristic of the Christian Church is (or ought to be) love. Christ reminds his disciples, and us as well: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.” (Jn. 15: 12). The apostle Paul writes: “On the subject of

mutual charity you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.” (1 Thess. 4: 9)

The Parish as a Community of Love

Thus, everything which concerns communal life in a communion of love, primarily (in the first place) refers to that community in which we regularly gather for common prayer, that is our local parish. Here it is worthwhile to recall psalm 132 (133):

How good it is, how pleasant, where the people dwell as one!
Like precious ointment on the head, running down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron, upon the collar of his robe.
Like dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion.
There the LORD has lavished blessings, life for evermore!

When it comes to fostering an atmosphere of harmony, agreement and cooperation, without arguments and conflicts, very much is due to the influence of the priest-pastor. It cannot be expected that everyone in the community will be in perfect agreement. However, the priest-pastor should manage his community in such a manner that everyone has the opportunity to express their opinion, while respecting the opinions of others, and that a difference of opinion would never have a disruptive influence on the community. Every parishioner should make a sincere effort to maintain an atmosphere of love, concord, and unity so that anyone from outside, observing the community could say: “look how they love one another!”

Christian Family

It is interesting to note how early Christians gathered for prayer in homes, as we infer from the mention of the so called "domestic churches" (see Romans 16: 5, 1 Corinthians 16: 9). Over time with a growing number of faithful, the Christian communities began to meet in larger buildings for the celebration of services and teaching, however, we cannot forget that for the believing Christian every home is to be a house of prayer. In this sense, in a parish community we have to keep in mind the importance of the Christian family which at all times, must be a “domestic church” that is a place and school of prayer, Christian learning and spiritual life. Our Ukrainian folk song captures this well:

*Where there's harmony in the family, there is peace and solitude,
There the people are fortunate, the place itself is blessed.
God blesses them, and sends them all good things
And lives with them forever, forever lives with them.*

A vibrant parish always supports the welfare of the Christian family and provides it with the resources it needs for the upbringing of children in understanding the truths and practices of the Christian faith. And in our Church, as in the majority of Eastern Christian Churches, when the pastor is a married priest he is called to give a good example of Christian family life.