

## One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic . . . Denomination?!?

While perusing a back-issue of our Church newspaper, the Visnyk/Herald, I came across an article which began with the words “*No matter what Christian denomination we follow, we are joined in one religious belief . . .*”.

It got me thinking about how many people hold erroneous ideas as to what the Church is. We confess belief in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”. Yet there are thousands upon thousands of groups, often with mutually exclusive doctrines and teachings, which call themselves Christian churches. How do we reconcile this reality with belief in one Church?

One way, the way of the author of the aforementioned article, is by way of denominationalism. The denominationalist believes that the fullness of the Christian faith cannot be contained in any one “denomination”. They believe that there is no body on earth which fully manifests all the attributes of the Church of Jesus Christ. For denominationalists every single one of the groups claiming to be “the Church” is in some way deficient, and the fullness of Christianity is found in none of them individually, but in all of them together. In other words, each “denomination” is nothing more than part of a whole called “the Church”, nothing more than a culturally and historically conditioned body which manifests that part of the Truth which God in His wisdom has seen fit to impart to it, and possesses no basis for claiming to be, by itself, the one Church which Christ founded.

Another false understanding of the Church is found in sectarianism. The sectarian also recognizes the existence of thousands of bodies claiming to be “the Church”, but in contradistinction to the denominationalist, they find the fullness of the Church not in all the different denominations together, but exclusively in their own sect. A strict sectarian believes that only in their own denomination the true teaching or the true mysteries may be found, and that everything outside their particular sect is darkness, heresy, and ignorance.

The realities of denominationalism and sectarianism exist within Christendom as a whole, as well as within Orthodoxy itself, and manifest themselves in many ways.

The “Evangelical” minister who shows up at the bedside of a faithful, lifetime member of the Orthodox Church and does their best to get them to pray the “sinner’s prayer”, or “accept Jesus as their own personal Saviour” is a prime example of the sectarian. “Salvation can only be found in my ‘church’ – so if you

don't do what I say you need to do in order to be saved you'll be damned for all eternity!”

As to denominationalists, we have the Anglican or Protestant minister (and sometimes the misguided Roman Catholic “eucharistic minister”) who invites everyone, whether a member of their church, whether baptized or not, to partake of the “Lord's Supper”, and makes those who refuse feel guilty of the greatest and most heinous of contemporary sins - intolerance and judgmentalism. “We're all the same”, they say, “so what makes you think you're different, or better?”

The Orthodox grandparent who gets angry at the priest because he won't give communion to their Roman Catholic grandchild is an example of an “Orthodox” denominationalist, while the believer for whom “the Church” is limited totally and exclusively to their own “jurisdiction” (whether construed along ethnic, political or theological lines) manifests a sectarian mentality.

It is the conviction of Orthodox Christians that the fullness of the one true Church of Jesus Christ is found only in the Orthodox Church. We don't receive communion or otherwise participate in the sacramental life of other churches not because we hold them in contempt, but because they in some way lack the fullness (“*catholicity*”) of the authentic Christian faith and Church.

Fr. Thomas Hopko, in the introduction to his book All the Fullness of God, states: *“The fullness of God in His Son and Spirit is in the Church which is Christ's body and bride. Catholicity means fullness. It is the quality of the Church which expresses her wholeness and integrity. The Church is the mystical presence of the Kingdom of God on earth. She is sacramentally constituted within the space and time of this age in human structures and forms, symbols and words, ceremonies and rites. . . all made divine by God's action in His Son and Spirit. As such the catholic Church is neither a denomination nor a sect. She is rather the world itself, the whole of creation as fashioned, redeemed and sanctified and restored by the power of God.*

In an essay from the same book entitled “Catholicity and Ecumenism” he goes on to state that *“The Orthodox Church understands itself to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the true Church of Christ on earth”,* and *“identifies itself with the one catholic Church in history and claims that there is an absolute identity and continuity of this church from the time of the apostles to the present day.”*

Jesus Christ founded neither a denomination nor a sect. He did not even found a religion, if “religion” is understood as a human construct consisting of rites, rituals, doctrines and dogma. Jesus simply taught the truth about life. He founded a Church in which that truth is preached and lived. Like Jesus Christ Himself, true Christians are neither denominationalists nor sectarians, but members of a Church, which is the Body of Christ on earth (1 Cor. 12:27), and the “*pillar and ground of the truth*” (I Tim. 3:15).

*Fr. Bohdan Hladio,*

*October, 2009*