

THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST AND THE WOMB OF SALVATION

Valerie A. Karras

**A homily given in celebration of the Year of St. Paul the Apostle
St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church, Irvine, California**

October 26, 2008

Thank you for inviting me to return here to preach as part of the celebrations for the feastday of St. Paul, the patron saint of this community. I don't know how many of you are aware of this, but I became aware of this parish many years before my cousin, Fr. Steve, came here as your pastor. One of my classmates and best friends from seminary, Fr. Jim Pappas, served here as your first lay assistant, when you were still a very young community and he was newly graduated from Holy Cross. I was impressed even then with what I learned of St. Paul's from him, and I was blessed to experience the life of this community firsthand when I lived here several years ago. It is a joy to see how you continue to grow and thrive in fellowship, to deepen in your faith, and to expand the works of love and charity – such as the funding of the new church in Tanzania – which are a natural impulse and spiritual fruit arising from that faith.

As we celebrate this week the feastday of St. Paul, it is of his views of community, of the Church, that I wish to speak today. Those of us from Greek and

other similar ethnic backgrounds are familiar with the importance of family and community, of how it is impossible to imagine our own individual lives independent of their interconnectedness to those around us. The sleeper hit from a few years back, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” perfectly exemplifies how the “American” fiancé of Nia Vardalos realizes that he is not marrying just her, but her immediate family, her extended family, and her faith.

Unfortunately, American society in many ways does not understand, much less value, our personal existence as inextricably connected to others, connected in such a way that we cannot be who we are truly meant to be outside of communion with others, with all the give and take, the guiding and being guided, the self-sacrifice and responsibility that life in community entails.

This is perhaps most particularly true in our approach to God. “I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.” How many times have we heard a friend, a colleague, or a neighbor say this? I know that I have heard it more times than I can count. Usually, those who say this mean that their personal beliefs do not coincide exactly with the doctrines of any one church or other religious group. They also are usually signaling their dislike for *organized* religion, their dislike being a reaction to the politics, abuse of power, petty jealousies, and other human failings to be found in most religious institutions (or, for that matter, in almost any institution of any kind, including, basically, any time two or more persons must deal with other).

This, of course, is the root of the problem. I understand what “spiritual but not religious” people *think* they mean when they say this, and I certainly don’t disagree with their concerns about corruption and hypocrisy. But, when I hear someone proclaim that he or she is “spiritual but not religious,” I hear something else, too: an arrogance, a self-righteousness, and a lack of self-sacrifice. Ultimately, what human institution *is* free of human failings? Do we decide to educate ourselves by reading at home rather than go to college or university because we might have a professor with whose philosophy we disagree? Do we treat ourselves when seriously ill rather than go to a doctor or hospital because, you know, there’s always the chance of medical malpractice? Do we quit our jobs rather than work for an employer because – who knows? – he may be having an adulterous affair or she may be cheating on her taxes?

Well, I suppose that some people actually *do* decide to entrust their education, their health, or their employment to themselves rather than to others who do not meet their standards of purity and perfection. But, are most of us *really* that morally and intellectually superior to those around us? And, if we think that we are, how honest are we being about ourselves? Are we seeing the mote in our neighbor’s eye while remaining oblivious to the log in our own eye?

Yes, the Church is filled with human beings who are in turn filled with all manner of human failings. We want things our way, we don’t listen to others, we

rush to judgment of others on the basis of rumor or partial information, we jump to illogical conclusions and make ill-considered decisions because of it, we say one thing and do the opposite – constantly – etc. We are fallen human beings, all of us – laypersons, clergy, hierarchs, and even monks and nuns – fallible, sin-prone humans who seem determined to obscure as much as possible the image of God within each and every one of us.

But the Church, which is indeed a human institution, is not *just* a human institution. It is the body of Christ (*1 Corinthians 12:27*), the household of God (*Ephesians 2:19*), the pillar and foundation of the truth (*1 Timothy 3:15*) and the womb of our salvation. Just as Christ is both human and divine, just as we humans are both body and soul, the Church is both a human institution *and* the transcendent body of Christ which is the womb ever-giving birth to our salvation. The Apostle Paul, who founded the church in Galatia, referred to the Galatians in his epistle to them as “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (*Galatians 4:19*). If Paul saw himself as a mother giving birth to Christians, how much more is the Church herself the maternal womb of our spiritual birth. We can be saved *only* by allowing ourselves to develop within that human-divine womb, only by allowing ourselves to be fed by the nutrients of the umbilical cord of the Life-Creating Spirit: the faith, the

prayers, the liturgical worship, the holy fellowship, and the sacraments of the Church.

Please don't deceive yourselves that this problem is only a contemporary one, that the Church just isn't what it used to be, and that pious sentiments from an earlier age were for that time and place but don't fit our contemporary condition. There has never been a "golden age" of the Church, a time when things ran the way they were supposed to, and clergy and laity acted in harmony with and out of love for each other and for Christ. Don't be so naïve. Take a look sometime, a *good* look, at the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. What was that parish community like? According to St. Paul, you had groups and factions whose strife and competitiveness was splitting the parish apart (the apostle who baptized me is better than the apostle who baptized you," chapter 1), parishioners suing each other in civil court (chapter 6), parishioners becoming sick and even dying from receiving the Eucharist unworthily because they were so morally corrupt (chapter 11), and even a guy shackled up with his stepmother, an outrageous situation that, inexplicably, had apparently raised no outcry within the parish itself (chapter 5). (As an aside, I remember my dogmatics professor at seminary, the late and beloved Bishop Gerasimos of Abydos, serenely opining, "Thank God for the Corinthians – if they had not had so many problems, we would have had much less of St. Paul's wisdom.")

In brief, in the very first generation of Christians, there was a community founded by apostles and counseled from afar by apostles, which was nevertheless full of angry, competitive, power-hungry, and immoral parishioners. So, how did the Apostle Paul greet this den of iniquity in the opening paragraph of his sometimes caustic and accusatory letter to them? “To the Church of God in Corinth, made holy in Christ Jesus and called to be saints” (*1 Corinthians 1:2*). Was he *kidding*? Was this greeting supposed to be some sort of psychological ploy to encourage better conduct?

Well, maybe – in part anyway. But, much more importantly, it was a theological declaration of the transcendent and salvific character of that fractured, combative, immoral, wounded community. That troubled, immature community – the very kind of religious community that “spiritual but not religious” people so disdain – was, according to the Apostle Paul, “made *holy* in Christ Jesus and called to be his *saints*.” (Note that the Greek word for saint – *hagios* – is the same as the word for holy: in other words, the community is made holy in Christ and the members of the community called to be Christ’s holy people.)

How can the Church be holy and make people holy when it is filled with and led by people who are, quite obviously, not holy? Because the Church is more than the sum of her parts. She is not just another human institution, like political institutions or corporations. Her “parts” are women and men created in the image

of God, which means created with an intrinsic desire for love toward and communion with each other and with God, just as God exists as a trinitarian communion whose love is expressed not only in the never-ending dance within the Trinity but in an ecstatic act of creating, sustaining that creation, and bringing that creation – us – into communion with God, who is Love itself.

How can the Church be holy when its members are not holy, and how can the Church be more than the sum of her parts? The Church’s “parts,” we the faithful baptized and chrismated members of the Church, are parts and members of a body: because the Church is the body of Christ. “You are the Body of Christ and individually members of it” (*1 Corinthians 12:27*). St. Paul spends considerable time elaborating this rich metaphor. Most of us understand his discussion of the idea that we, as members of a body, do not all have the same gifts and do not all perform the same functions. We understand that the Church needs all of our various gifts, and that our very diversity is the Church’s strength.

How much, though, do we think about the idea that the whole – the body – is truly greater than the sum of its parts, that is, us? Do we consider how, as Christ took on our mortal and passion-driven human nature and transformed it into an immortal, deified human nature, Christ takes each of us, as members of his body, into himself and continually works to heal and transform us from mortal and passion-driven fallen human beings into immortal, perfected sons and daughters of

the Father deified through eternally-deepening union with Christ in the Holy Spirit?

This is the Church, this is *who she is*: the body of Christ and the womb of our salvation. In St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, as in his other letters to various Christian communities, he makes clear that we can only come to know Christ, we can only grow in Christ, from within the *body* of Christ, the Church. The apostle can't even conceive of an isolated, solitary Christian: the term itself is oxymoronic. There is extraordinary, if unconscious, hubris in the notion that we are better than others and can learn nothing from them. If nothing else, living a life of faith and love within a community of imperfect human beings is a great lesson in humility. (And – news flash! – we, with our own imperfections, are providing opportunities for humility and patience to our fellow parishioners.) Not coincidentally, the great ascetic fathers and mothers of the Church are unanimous in seeing humility as the greatest virtue and its opposite, pride, as the greatest vice, which can cause a spiritual athlete to tumble from the very pinnacle of spiritual progress.

This is part of the problem for us – and the value – in living as a community of faith. It is not just that we are put to the test to overlook the faults of others, to learn the patience to deal with their quirks and issues and with the problems they create within the community. A church family, like our own personal families,

forces us to look inside ourselves; that is the really scary part. Can we humble ourselves enough to see our own faults? Can we humble ourselves enough to consider that perhaps our own opinions and ideas are not infallible? (I speak here from a limited self-awareness of my own weaknesses.)

How do we interpret the Scriptures, for instance? The biblical fundamentalist notion that Scripture is self-interpreting is disproved by the very multiplicity of denominations that has arisen within Protestantism, as every person interprets Scripture to his or her own liking and is convinced that he or she knows better than everyone else. Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople was perplexed when the first generation of Protestant theologians wrote him to ask if Orthodoxy ascribed to the fundamental belief of the Protestant Reformation, enshrined in the Augsburg Confession, that we are saved by faith and not by works. He responded that of course we are saved by faith in Christ and not by our own merits, but he could not understand how anyone could separate faith from works in any case. This is because Patriarch Jeremiah understood faith as the Church had always understood it, as something deeply relational and experiential, not as an intellectual exercise of mere recognition and shallow affirmation. A few years ago, after having spent several weeks in my church history survey course reading the writings of early Christians, one of my students asked me when it was, then, that Christians started

believing that we are saved by faith alone. I answered, “The Protestant Reformation.”

The Church does not insist that there is only one interpretation of a scriptural passage, but the collective spiritual wisdom and experiences of the holy women and men of the Church provide guideposts for us along our own spiritual journey. They help us to discern whether our own theological interpretations and our own spiritual experiences are genuine and divine in origin or false and self-generated (if not worse). As I tell my students in church history when we study the great theological controversies of the early church about the nature of God as Trinity and Christ as the God-Man, those whom the Church ultimately condemns as heretics usually have one thing in common: they keep trying to reduce God to a human level of comprehension, to reduce or even eliminate the paradoxes of God’s very manner of being and of the Son of God’s becoming human. Ultimately, this is idolatry: creating God in our own image, according to the limits of our own intellect. The Triune God and the incarnation of Christ are an affront to the limits of our logic, but it is their very “illogic” that makes them dogmas of the Church, among the few beliefs that we Orthodox Christians hold necessary for salvation. This is because, in reality, the beliefs that God is Triune and that the Son of God became human and died on the Cross are not illogical: rather, they *transcend*

human logic. Anyone who is unwilling to recognize that God is greater than human logic is, really, unwilling to approach God.

In addition to the Church's guiding us in the faith so that we can have a genuine relationship with God rather than a self-deluded one, the church community provides us with spiritual fathers and mothers as personal guides for our own spiritual journeys, helping us – sometimes even forcing us – to confront the self-deception and self-justification we use to obscure from our consciousness any truthful recognition of our own faults and sins, of the hurt we have caused others. Choosing a proper spiritual mother or father is crucial, of course, for the wrong person can do enormous damage to our spiritual psyche, but it is very difficult for us to mature properly if we have no guide or tutor. A spiritual director is someone who has traveled the path before us and can warn us of some of the dangers and pitfalls, as well as direct us to the oases and scenic vistas.

The basic doctrines of the Church and the personal guidance we receive from a spiritual mother or father are akin to the instruction and guidance we receive from a top-notch educational institution and from its individual faculty members, committed to helping students not merely to acquire knowledge but to develop and mature into caring and productive persons and citizens. Likewise, the doctrinal faith of Christ's Holy Church and the spiritual guidance of her saints – her holy

ones – provides the nurturing environment we each need in order to mature spiritually into caring and productive members of the body of the Christ.

But, the Church as the womb of our salvation does more than this. Through her liturgical and sacramental life, the Church actually provides us with a unique opportunity to be united to Christ, through the Holy Spirit, as part of a community of faithful people united to Christ and offering creation back to its Creator. Of course, we recognize that the Holy Spirit permeates all of creation, and is not active only within the Church. At the same time, the evangelist John the Theologian has made it abundantly clear in his Gospel that Christ has sent the Holy Spirit, the Comforter (Paraclete), to Christ's band of followers. We typically celebrate the birth of the Church on the Feast of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on the whole gathering of Christ's followers: not, as many icons unfortunately depict, the twelve apostles alone, but the entire community, including, as the Acts of the Apostles says, Mary the Theotokos and the other women.

Christ gives the Holy Spirit to the *Church*, and we receive the Holy Spirit and the Body and Blood of Christ within the *Church*. We do not baptize ourselves, and we do not receive the Eucharist alone (it is notable that, unlike in the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox priests cannot celebrate a eucharistic liturgy if there is no one else present.) The sacraments of the Church and its overall liturgical life

are opportunities for us to deepen our relationship to God *together with* others. Just as we enjoy the shared laughter, joy, and fellowship of a Thanksgiving dinner with our extended family, so too do we enjoy the special joy and communion uniting us to God and to each other within the sacramental and liturgical life of our community. Yes, each one of us has a unique relationship with God, but that relationship does not exist in isolation: it is part of a broader set of relationships, just as a relationship between brother and sister, or parent and child, exists not in isolation but in the context of a whole family. The individual and the communal relationships support and nurture each other – neither one can be strong and healthy if the other is weak and atrophied.

This means that we can only be truly human if we are both in communion with God *and* in communion, and community, with each other. When the Sadducee attorney asked Christ to name the greatest commandment, Jesus responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (*Matthew 22: 37-39*). Christ himself made it clear that we cannot be Christians in isolation, that we cannot love God if we do not love those around us. Parish life is a life of humility, patience, self-sacrifice, and love. It means submitting our own desires and beliefs to the community as a whole. I never cease to be amazed at how seldom, during wedding

services, anyone pays attention to the first verse of the epistle reading, from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, focusing on the verses that follow and whether they mean that husbands have dominion over their wives, when the key to interpreting those verses is that first verse of the reading: "Be subject to *one another* out of reverence for Christ [emphasis added]" (Ephesians 5:21).

So, our life in Christ is not something distinct from our life in the Church.

The Church is not simply a religious institution in which we may choose to participate because of its social gatherings, fundraising banquets and festivals, youth activities, or cultural events. Those gatherings, banquets, festivals, and events are important only insofar as they are a natural expression of the love for and responsibility toward each other which God nurtures in our hearts as we grow closer to Him. As Christ said, the second commandment, to love our neighbor, is like the first, to love God. Being actively involved in the life of the Church is not optional to salvation. It is only within the Church that each of us receives the guidance and direction necessary to strip away our egoistic delusions about ourselves and our false, anthropocentric ideas about God. It is only within the Church that we become incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism and grow and deepen that relationship through the Eucharist. It is only within the Church that we are made aware that our relationship to Christ exists not in a vacuum but within a web of relationships.

We cannot grow as Christians, we cannot acquire the gifts of the Holy Spirit, except within the life of the Church. The Church is indeed the body of Christ and the womb of salvation. Can we humble ourselves enough to learn what the Church has to teach us as guide and mother? Can we care enough to reach out to those in need because we see in our brother and sister the Face and Image of God? Can we be patient enough to submit our own willful desires and self-confident egos to the Church as a whole? Can we be courageous enough to identify and confront our own sins and weaknesses and nevertheless reach out to God with all our might? Ultimately, are we willing to accept Christ's call to be His saints, his holy ones, a vocation that we can accomplish only within his Holy Church, which is truly the body of Christ and the womb of salvation?



Professor Valerie Karras
Perkins School of Theology