

COMMUNION: THE BACKBONE OF LIFE IN CHRIST*

Metropolitan Emilianos

Among the many slogans and words which fascinate modern people is the term "communion-koinonia". It reflects the deepest aspirations of us all. We earnestly seek this fellowship instead of continual enmity, mistrust and bloodshed. Communion is the particular concern of Christians, divided as we are, and unable as yet to reach a satisfactory consensus on the essentials of our faith.

There is a secular parallel to this: The European states, after the collapse of Marxism, have sought more unification, monetary, political, educational, social, while keeping their separate identities, inherited cultures and faith.

These are noble visions, but there is one thing that has not been taken into account: the interior world of man, with all its passions, its violent forces, its destructive manifestations, all the consequence of fallen human nature. In fact what this continent is seeking is the unification of what Europeans *have* rather than what they *are*. "*Having*" and "*possessing*" prevail over "*being*".

Christians, particularly Monks, open their ears once they hear the magic word "communion" because this reality constitutes part of their essence. The "Ecclesia" of the ancient Greeks, the Church, signifies precisely the convocation of those who place their faith in Christ as Saviour and Redeemer. The Gospel makes it very clear that it is impossible to confess the faith and live it exclusively alone and in isolation from others. Christ's prayer does not open with the invocation "My Father who is in heaven...."; it opens emphatically and importantly with "*Our* Father..." The "*Our*" leads at the same time both to God and to other people. It implies an ethical engagement of a communal kind during this life and even beyond it. It is deplorable that so often Christian individualism dominates the communal dimension.

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Christians, whether lay or Religious, must be reminded, and must remind others too, that salvation is not individual. This does not mean that individual piety is excluded. Gregory of Nyssa builds optimism and hope on the idea of universal salvation in Christ (*De anima et resurrectione*; Pg. 46, 109). Given that humanity forms a unique species and obtains its salvation corporately, Gregory focusses less on individual time than on universal time. Humankind, corporately and individually, had its experience of evil in the person of our parents, Adam and Eve. It will regain the redeemed state collectively, as one body. In this period of grace human beings are called to share their discipleship and sonship with others. It was for this purpose that Christ came down: to enable this collective salvation by uniting everyone into one family, one body, with himself as the head. In this way there is realised a mystical *anthropogenesis*, a sharing with others because of our common origin.

Gregory developed this truth in depth by stating that patriarchs, prophets and saints waited for such a communion. This movement from the individuality of the history of salvation to the global, reminds us of the absolute necessity of communal action for one's self and for other people. The history of Christians is related to the history of the whole world. The remaking of the history of each person and of the world is in fact a kind of "construction-kataskevi", that is, not an instant creation of beings placed in time, but the gradual construction of the world, which expresses the march of all people towards communion and fraternisation. "Now is the time for seeing, he says, certainly painful, because of tensions and conflicts, but all achieved unions by the contemplatives, anticipate the harvest to come in the last consummation of times" (In *Cantica Canticorum* 5; Pg 44, 869 and 873)

While for worldly spirits the "other" constitutes a threat, an obstacle or a hindrance with his own demands and claims, for the Christian the "other" presents an excellent opportunity for developing charity and fellowship. Both parties benefit: the doer of charity learns to reduce his selfishness, while the one who is helped is joined in solidarity with the stranger through his meekness and self-offering. A truly reconciled humanity will be realised only by cultivating more and more of this principle of Christianity. Monks must not be either heartened or grieved because of their distance from its daily life and its upheavals. In their silence, unceasing prayer and their contacts with so many wounded souls, they express the *koinonia* which is nothing else than an extension of their evangelical style of daily living. Our true mission is not only quietness and contemplation. Every human being has a role to

play in the restoration of this present world. With these preliminary reflections in our minds let us pass on to other aspects of our theme.

Koinonia: Inherent to Christian Identity

Early Christians were not worried or perplexed about seeking models of unity or ecclesiastical communion, or patterns of true koinonia. For them such vital issues were settled once and for ever. Consequently they were not obsessed or nervous about how to build up an ideal community life and human relationships. They were conscious that at baptism each Christian became 'Gloria Dei Vivens Homo', a living person reflecting the beauty and grandeur of God, as was formulated by Irenaeus (Adv. Haer, IV, 20, 5-7). This conviction became a most dynamic force for shaping their lifestyle, but also their vision of a future society. Unlike the Greek moralists who were searching through philosophical speculation and rational formulation for man's value and destiny, Christians were sure that the model for true life was given and set before them for all time.

The most ideal model was offered already a long time ago by the Son of God. He loved the world so much, that He became one of us in order to offer not only an example of meekness, but also the necessary means for its achievement. Self-offering constitutes the most eloquent sign of one's love for the other. Evangelical charity, is a real mystery. It cannot be understood by us unless we are also self-giving, following the same way of true love – self-emptying koinonia. The first Apologists were reaffirming this extraordinary achievement in the statement: "Christians were loving each other even when they did not know each other before".

It is fashionable nowadays to look for new imaginary models as if there are none left or as if they disappeared from earth a long time ago. Modern society seeks in vain for alternative ideals and models. The ideal society, the ideal fellowship, the ideal *humanum* and most perfect relationship known as *communio-koinonia* is simply there before us; it suffices to open our eyes and put the model into practice. In the ecumenical movement much discussion goes on about how to attain "models of unity and communion", as if the models which have existed since the apostolic period have become irrelevant, inapplicable, obsolete, outdated, invalidated, and void. This unfair approach, by systematically refusing to see what exists already, results in the repetition of countless consultations which are painstaking and expensive and come up with "new" findings which are doubtful and unreliable. Thus we are in a continuous circle of experimenting with all sorts of systems,

tinkering with methods, performing theological acrobatics, venturing into the unknown, and reaching the most dubious conclusions.

Christians from the beginning have had before them the koinonia of the Holy Trinity, a free koinonia which relates the three Persons. This Trinitarian koinonia was underlined by St. Cyprian in a remarkable formula (*De orat. Domin.* 2-3; PL 4, 536). Later it was developed by Symeon the New Theologian to prevent ambiguities and misrepresentations: "If God were deprived either of the other two, that is the Son or the Spirit, then He could not be Father. He could not even be alive, separated from the Spirit vivifying all by giving the life and the very being" (*Hymns* 12,30-35; SC 156,245).

Such explanation certainly is not given on conceptual grounds by scrutinising and investigating the mystery entailing the Godhead. Never shall we know exactly how the three persons are related in a remarkable perichoresis. We rely on inclusive language, fragmental allusions, and this is called apophatic theology. The trouble is that apophasis too easily may become an excuse for an inadmissible total and absolute silence.

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed to us thanks to a historical event: namely Christ's communion. In this way the ancient world heard for the first time that it is communion which causes things "to be", "to be new", to "have hypostasis", because nothing exists without God's intervention. True Christians, regenerated and lifted up to higher levels, become able to understand and to put into practice such koinonia which draws its source from God. St. Basil explains the secret of such koinonia in the daily life of monks: although they are flesh and bones they manifest this communion in all its dimensions. (*The Long Rules: Question 7*).

The Trinitarian perichoresis disarms any flagrant human absolute autonomy. We are referential beings, that is, we belong to God as he belongs to us. Because of this interdependence, a voluntary relationship of love is established between God and his creatures. If, therefore, God is Father for ever and to all ages of ages, as is proclaimed in every liturgical hymnography, then it is rightly assumed that in the immensity of his love, God may integrate us into his paternal blessings and adopt us in his incarnate Son. If again, the eternal Spirit exchanges his gifts in the love koinonia relationship of the Trinity, it can transcend all existing obstacles in order to communicate the gifts it possesses even beyond itself to created beings. This is why divine action is always Trinitarian, from the first moment of creation until the

final recapitulation of all things in Christ, and by Him, in the Father. This made Irenaeus state: "The Father is always He who decides and commands, the Son is He who acts and creates, the Spirit is he who nourishes and gives growth; and little by little, man thereby progresses toward perfection." (Adv. Haer. 4,38,3).

Such Trinitarian and especially Pneumatological operation elevates the persons concerned into the charismatic and specially gifted, and their words become a second canon. Thus the words of the elders of the Egyptian desert were remembered and eventually written down. In time they became a kind of Christian midrash, a commentary on Scripture and its continuing relevance and importance. Their "sayings" constituted a double tradition of authority for those living in the desert. This double tradition, like good root stock, forms the secure foundation for the Apophthegmata or Sayings of the early desert monks. The sayings, like roses, or branches filled with grapes, rise from that stock. From its earliest days monasticism has had masters and disciples, spiritual fathers and spiritual children, those experienced in the tradition and those who have come to the desert to learn. Antony attached himself to an elder, as did Pachomius. Brief in many cases, the words of the elders were often seen as carrying the same weight of authority as those of Scripture.

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In treating such a timely theme, we cannot overlook its connection with the ecumenical endeavour for unity, that is for full koinonia. Ecumenical dialogues admittedly have achieved considerable progress in the last decades. Agreement on many subjects controversial until now have been clarified, and everyday we witness promising signs for further consensus. Unity thus becomes one of the basic causes for suffering and for demolishing the existing barriers. During the Patristic period, appeals and moving letters were sent to quarrelling ecclesiastical bodies to urge reconciliation. I quote three such extracts:

Basil of Caesarea, seeing the tragic rupture caused by the Arians, sent to bishops and clergy letters urging their return to the Nicene faith so that peace could be established:

"I think firmly that for those who truly and rightly minister to the Lord, one preoccupation alone is suitable: to bring back into Unity the Churches which in many ways and for different reasons have been fragmented from each other". (Epist.114,1: PG 32, 528)

John Chrysostom commenting upon the moral disorders and the absence of Ecclesiastical discipline in the Church at Corinth, states the following:

“The name of the Church, Ecclesia, does not signify separation, but it is the name of unity and symphony. The Ecclesia was not established so that we who are assembled should remain divided, but that the divided should become united. And precisely this is confirmed by the convention, synodos”. (Hom. 27,2 in I Cor. PG 61, 228)

Gregory Nazianzene in similar terms points out:

“We do not intend to dominate, but to welcome again brothers; because of the separation we are torn in pieces in our hearts”. (Sermon 41, 8 on Pentecost; PG 36, 440)

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Two objections might be made against such an eulogy of communion. The first objection is that freely chosen poverty which is not imposed, humility, ascetic self-denial and all the rest, can easily be understood within a restrictive community life, far away from worldly temptations and worries. But how can a simple lay person practise the high virtue of koinonia in his daily dealings? We must remember that in St.Basil's time, the lifestyle of the laity did not differ much from that of the monks. Lay people of both sexes were asked to practise almost the same ethical duties which were binding upon all the baptised. The lifestyle of all baptised Christians, whether in monasteries or in the towns, was almost identical. It was this living faith among merchants, workers, youth, peasants, soldiers, which witnessed to the gospel of salvation, drawing Jews and pagans to Christ.

This term “communio” was not used so much among Christians. After all, they were not scrupulous about religious language. But they were living the reality of fellowship with God and with their fellow human beings, behaving as “angels on earth”, citizens of heaven on earth, to borrow terms from the Letter to Diognetus (5, 1-17; 6, 1-7). Life among Christians then is meant to be real “communio sanctorum”. In a prophetic way and typologically Christ speaks in the Old Testament saying: “I will proclaim your name to my brothers, in full assembly I shall sing your praises” (Heb.2, 12). This text is taken from Ps. 21,23, and shows how the coming Messiah will treat men and women like his brothers and sisters. The assembly or ecclesia in this context implies the existence of a close relationship or koinonia.

Of course it is not yet that koinonia after Pentecost where the Holy Spirit is the distributor and source, as St. Paul shows in I Cor.12,4.

The second objection by many concerns the realisation of true communion, remembering the extent of evil, of conflicts, arrogance, selfishness, and clash of interests. How can such overpraised virtue be developed? Of course Koinonia does not blossom as a mushroom from one day to the next. It requires a long process and self-discipline. In the early Church candidates for full membership, koinonia, were carefully examined in order to pass the stage of Catechumens. Only after a long test were they admitted to the order of the faithful. Eucharist was administered with extreme caution, depriving those who had fallen into post-baptismal sin and had thus broken the spiritual bonds of true communion.

Nowadays parish life is rather lax, too lenient, and compromising. Consequently the elements required for the growth of koinonia are inadequate, absent or poor in quality. How then can we expect to find koinonia under such conditions? There is too much euphoric rhetoric about koinonia, but very little of its substance. Or from another perspective, communion is often understood in the horizontal dimension only, while it is primarily the union between heaven and earth, between life and eternity, as communicants experience at the Eucharist. Here there is no feeling of loneliness, but of a true koinonia fellowship with all brothers, and with martyrs past and present. Thus Ignatius of Antioch asks all brothers for their intercessions in solidarity in order to be strengthened before his tribulations. (Ad Ephesians 70; Magnes. 14. Tral, 13; Rom. 9)

Everywhere there is a complaint about the lack of communication in our modern societies, in spite of the fantastic development of communications of all kinds. Man thus is terribly alone. No other institution can heal his wounds. And because of such loneliness, man has become vulnerable and fragile. "Hell is the other" says J.P. Sartre. In his book *Huis Clos* Sartre implies that we are distanced one from the other. Contacts and relationships became more and more superficial or, even worse, possessive and abusive. In such a depressing situation, how can we speak of communion-koinonia? Everyone tries to dominate the other person. The fear of the other, the mistrust, makes one avoid contacts with the other person.

No contact means also no regard, no face to face meeting, no looking one another in the eye. Reluctance to see the other leads to indifference, except when we feel that our rights are infringed. If we could only acquire for a moment other eyes for

seeing, then we should be surprised by the wonder and resources of our fellow human beings. We shall discover that they are similar to me with the same visions and with the same faults. Above all, that we share the same hope, namely, that we should not remain alone or lost. There is a God, in the image of whom all men and women are created.

Despair, inner revolt, starts the moment one refuses to recognise the other as an equal fellow human being. There is then no more identity of personhood; we are lost in anonymity and indifference. Perhaps man is the unique being who is free to accept the other or to reject him, insulting and ignoring him. By giving more thought to our own dignity and to the dignity of others, we begin to appreciate the importance of personal communion and the common heritage of God's kingdom. True life cannot exist without relationships. Introducing *koinonia* into our lifestyle, we begin to live differently from the way we lived before. We are reminded by the Church Fathers that Christians are both relational and referential.

When we become aware that we are interdependent, that we share solidarity and responsibility and that we are fellow-builders and co-warriors, we see as a consequence the spontaneous action for mutual correction, for helping the fallen, and for sustaining, as was the practice in the early Church, those who belong to the order of the four penitential classes. We see the common supplications during worship and liturgical life, and the responsibilities of the baptismal sponsor to instruct neophytes and help their spiritual growth. Besides, there is the diaconal function of feeding the needy, the organisation of charitable institutions under the general label of philanthropia. Each Christian, in brief, was supposed not to live for himself, but to share with, to care for, and to sustain the other. All such motivations were nurtured by the conviction that we all, irrespective of social class or age, form together the body of Christ (I Cor.12,26).

Christians were convinced that heaven starts here and now on earth, within us, within each one of us, here, this very moment, near the bed of the sick, even in the slums of the hungry, or the hidden rooms of rejected and marginalised brothers and sisters. Social justice and *diakonia* are not the privileged slogans of socialists and Marxists. They were proclaimed long before by Jesus, the friend of all such miserable beings. Human assistance is a duty not only of the earthly, but of heavenly people also. This is the very soul of Christian humanism. Regardless of its metaphysical character, our faith is also realistic, earthly, worldly. The criteria of final judgment will be what we have done for our neighbour, whether Greek or Jew, during this life on earth.

Christians who are absorbed by the life hereafter, ignoring the challenges of this present world, forget that the other life is gained through the life of today.

All ascetic or patristic texts attest to, and convey, this wide meaning of *communio*, as concrete relationship with, and concern for, our fellow man. Thus Macarius of Egypt states, "there is no other way for man to be saved than through his neighbour" (Homily 37, 3 PG 34, 752c) Abba John Kolobos, born about 339, a famous Egyptian monastic figure, said: "A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top". They said to him, "What does this saying mean?". He said, "The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this one." (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 39: PG 65, 217A)

From the above "apophthegmata" we see that our love for God passes the way known as love for our fellow man. Where there exists a true *koinonia* with God, there is no need for any reflection upon social bonds and relationships. Bishops in history who relied upon such grounds intervened in conflicts and found remarkable solutions. Thus Acacius, Bishop of Amidis, stood out for the release of Persian captives in the year 422 during a war against the Byzantine army. Instead of more bloodshed, he was working for peace and their liberation was effected. (See account in Socrates: Ecc. His 7,21; PG 67, 781B).

In this context one remark is needed, namely that Patristic language is inclusive and truth is expressed with a variety of words. The main concern of the Fathers is edification, fertilizing human relations, and not academic research. Thus *koinonia* can be found in many terms as in:

Theodoret Cyrr: PG 82, 780A

John Chrysost: PG 48, 135 and 57,168

Cyril of Alex. PG 72,587B

John Chrys. PG 61,532-534

Nilus Egyptian PG 79,192

John Chrys. PG 60,535

Greg.Nyssa PG 46, 461

Theodore Stud.PG 99,1109

Theodorete Cyrr PG 82,784

Theodore.Cyrr PG.82,216.

Disrespect and contempt for this distinctive relationship in Christ has led in modern times to the neglect of values, to the downgrading of issues vital for a healthy person to person communion and for the building up of a better society. This perverse generation has much to say about freedom but speaks of rights only in selective and exclusive terms. We are assailed from every direction by the demands of abortionists, gun lobbies, blood sports protesters, supporters of euthanasia, feminist groups, pornographers and "minorities" of every creed and colour. The list goes on endlessly. The confusion is such that the one right that must be rejected out of hand is the right to have an opposing belief. That belief of the majority seems generally to be founded in Christian values. In many quarters that "right" is now attacked violently. Time and again society and the Church are made to suffer by the activities of small but vociferous groups of people.

The worst is following in a defeatist kind of way, because many confessional families and Church denominations, feel free to run with the spirit of the age. Ignoring the wisdom of the Apostles and the faith testified by the blood of the Martyrs and Saints, they turn their back upon the Gospel's warnings and innovate. Turning Christianity on its head, they treat the Gospel message like a theological smorgasbord. Casting aside the restraints of the Church, homosexuality is promoted, women are ordained, bestiality is tolerated and alliance with 'multi-faith' worship is encouraged, even in the great cathedrals. Our youth has been brainwashed into accepting these wide ranging and evil influences as the norm. Like the later Roman Empire, food and circuses is all that matters for many. Civilisation itself seems to be standing at the crossroads.

Koinonia is Monastic

We consider the Basilian text fundamental, a sort of the charter of human relationships in its highest expression, a perfect realisation and a remarkable formulation. St.Basil knew quite well that evangelical perfection and ethical precepts remain pure theory and eloquent ethical literature as long as they are not transformed into concrete acts, visible in daily life, under even the most difficult conditions. If Christianity claims to be the unique truth, then it must be seen in daily lifestyle, in human relationships, where human selfishness is confronted and tested. The visibility and distinctiveness of Christians became the best missionary instrument in the early Church, captivating the high esteem of the pagan world and bringing more new converts than any other missionary activity. Such Christians were not content only to proclaim their new faith, they implemented what they believed in their lives.

This was the secret of expansion of the communities from conquest to conquest.

St. Basil of Caesarea, at first gives an account how individual ascetics in their solitude were enabled to overcome aggressive passions of human nature, moving through them to the amelioration of their souls. Thus they became true philosophers. Then he moves on to explain that in his days ascetics started to live in common, in cœnobitic style, fighting together for their advancement to perfection, each profiting from the experience of the other, and so mutually encouraging and helping each other to the same end. By preferring this community askesis, they show the advantages of living together, because through koinonia and symbiosis, they return to the true goodness which is more fitting for our nature.

Ascetic Long Rules 18, 1–2; PG. 31,1381 B

Koinonia is Ecclesial

That union between God and man that existed in Paradise and that was broken as a result of man's disobedience, is now restored through Christ as head and his Church as his body. In this christified community, baptised members are reborn, reconciled, re-made, justified, sanctified, saved; they become "gods by grace", with the assumption of course that they satisfy all the required conditions of this goal, and that they possess total commitment. Within the Church, a Christian enters into communion with God, as well as with his fellow men, thereby surpassing and relinquishing selfish individualism to acquire instead a state of unselfish brotherhood in Christ. John Damascene finds the climax of such double "koinonia" in the Eucharistic fellowship:

"Koinonia is a true definition of the term because through it we enter into communion with Christ by participating in his flesh and in his divinity while at the same time entering into communion and uniting with one another. Since we all become the one body of Christ and blood members being promoted to the status means sharing Christ's body-syssomoi Christou". (Expos.Orth.Fid.4)

Eucharistic community, therefore, testifies that we are no longer disparate entities. We became and we continue to be one brotherhood, the family of God, the body of Christ, embracing true fellowship and divine-human unity. This conciliar view strengthens the distinctive character of the community of persons in Christ. The Reformation witnessed the emergence of the concept of a one-sided relationship

which claimed that a church could be founded wherever the faithful gathered, and that this type of assembly was the only requirement of the existence of a church. In contrast the Church Fathers maintained that the Church precedes and salvation follows (Clement of Rom: 2nd Letter 14, 2-4; Hermas Shepherd: Vision 2,4,I; Clement of Alex. Ex Theodotou 4 I; Pg. 9, 677).

The ecclesiological principle of Ignatius of Antioch that "whoever by selfishness does not come together - is proud and thus separates himself from the whole". (Eph.5) was later synodically sanctioned by the 6th Ecumenical Council in 691:

"In the event that any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or anyone else on the list of the clergy, or any layman who has no grave necessity or no particular difficulty that compels him to abstain himself from his own church for a very long time, fails to attend church on Sundays for three consecutive weeks, while living in the city, if he be a cleric, let him be deposed from office: but if he be a layman, let him be removed from Communion". (Canon 80)

The terms used in the above canon have a most important ecclesiological bearing on the frequent gathering of the parishioners as well as on the nature of congregation. They reveal the true identity of being Ecclesial. Each person must.

It is inconceivable for a Christian to be separated from the synaxis, the fellowship of brothers and sisters. Also vigorous is the Sardica Council in 343 with its 11th canon:

"Whenever a bishop goes from one city, or from one province, for the sake of pride, with a view to having eulogies bestowed upon him or to show that he is devoted to religion, and desires to stay there too long a time, and if the bishop of that city is not an experienced teacher, we decree that he shall not treat the latter scornfully, and deliver sermons too continuously, thereby endeavouring to bring disgrace and ignominy upon the bishop of that place.

For this excuse has been wont to cause trouble, and such cunning rascality shows that he is endeavouring to court and to usurp the other's benefice, and that he will not hesitate to abandon the church assigned to him and to step over into the other one."

The warning of the Councils against any such selfish approach on the part of Church membership demonstrates the damage caused in modern parishes from periodical or occasional Eucharistic attendance. This in turn results in the falsification

of the communal character of the celebrated sacraments, such as Baptism and Marriage. Indeed the modern parish does not provide its members with the possibility of living the communion in Christ and thus sharing their joys and sorrows with all others. This again explains the absence of the concept of deep spirituality and growth in Christ. These churchgoers can never become conscious members of the body of Christ.

The Ecclesial parish which serves as a microcosm of the universal Catholic Church, represents the realm of the fulfilment of all hopes, present and past. Here, all noble ambitions and visions find place leaving no room for despair and unemployment. It becomes a place that endures all adversities except the division of humankind that forms friends into enemies. Christ did not descend to earth to add one more religion to those already existing, but rather, as the Prophets anticipated, to build up his unique Church by gathering all individuals together to form one family.

Two miracles made this possible: the Incarnation and Pentecost. It is for this reason that the being of the Church cannot be compared with any other association, since there exists no other such unity, but rather only divisions. The Church is something new to the world and cannot be compared and defined with any other living earthly reality. This uniqueness, this unique aspect, makes it foolishness, and a scandal to the worldly mind. The rediscovery of the miracle of the church for the realisation of true humanity also incites the rediscovery of the great contribution of the Parish whereby hate was transformed to love, division was transformed to unification.

Reconciling and bringing people together into a close relationship and uniting heaven and earth with one another is the everlasting task of the Church. The Parish gathering is not a simple social event that is characterised by a large crowd instead of small group. Rather its main feature lies in inciting in individuals a sense of self-denial, and in allowing and encouraging them to share their joys and sufferings, their tears and fears. The community-koinonia excludes only those individuals who refuse to be united with Christ, and with the other members of His body. During the Pre-sanctified Liturgy of St. Gregory, the deacon asks, "Nobody from the Catechumens, the uninitiated, those unwilling to join the others, remain in this Sacrifice!". After this, he turns with the positive commission, "Do you know each other? Do develop a sense of acquaintance with one another." This instruction is given because of man's difficulty in understanding his fellow men in accepting

them and in cultivating fellowship, so that the Church's parish constitutes a true communion. This type of an inner preparation enables us to overcome mistrust, alienation and self-exclusion.

While we realise how demanding and how timely is the discussion of koinonia, we must be critical of the colossal inconsistency and contradiction between what we discuss and confess and what happens in reality. Today Christians do not live what they profess. We are losing, if we have not already lost, the very sense of community-salvation, of sharing material and spiritual blessings as well, motivated by a brotherly spirit. In modern society, but also contemporary Eucharistic communities or Parishes, we have ceased to be sharing, supporting and caring of each other. So often the Orientals blame Westerners as individualists, self-imprisoned, praising their own liturgical heritage and patristic tradition of synaxis-koinonia. But in full honesty the picture in reality of most Orthodox parishes is disappointing and less bright than elsewhere. The ancients would have known better.

They knew that being at peace with the Church was the testing of the mystery, the very sacrament, which assures one and determines whether the baptised is at peace with God. Ecclesiology rather than the proclamation of faith and the claim of one's orthodoxy, offered the opportunities for testing the kind of Church membership. This was so, because in the Ecclesial reality, that is, in daily relationships and manifold dealings, one was invited to give evidence of one's true transparent quality. Otherwise, one was disqualified for failing in to put into action one's solemn belief and convictions.

It is tragic to feel isolated, deprived of the warmth of such true communion. We feel insecure, unsafe, exposed to all sorts of deadly perils. This isolation wells up in lonely dissatisfaction with psychological effects on the soul's health and vitality. We begin to feel that something is wrong, something important is missing in spite of the fact that our life is plunged into so many enjoyments and other privileges. We must always bear in mind that ecclesiologically a parish is the nucleus of the total universal Church where her members are invited to prove their fidelity or their poor spirituality. There is the mystical body of Christ. As such, she is expected to radiate and confirm what she is. To manifest, firstly her union with Christ, by producing Christ-minded members, living, feeling and witnessing to this empirical reality.

Furthermore, this loneliness is alarming especially in our large impersonal suburban parishes. This betrays a flagrant contradiction, discrediting the very identity

of parishioners and reducing their vitality to the detriment of the great activity of seeking the coming of God's kingdom on earth here and now. Christ can never be divided. He remains for ever the cornerstone of unity and koinonia in a parish, which means in the life of parishioners, as Cyril of Alexandria comments:

"Christ is and remains forever whole both in each one and in all others as well. He only is our peace in human relations. He gathers us into that unity, on one hand concerning the unanimity between us, and on the other, through him to God through the Holy Spirit." (De adoratione in Spiritu, 15; PG. 68, 972)

The Church is rightly called Ecclesia – assembly – because it calls forth and assembles all men, as the Lord says in Leviticus 8 : "Then assemble the whole community at the entrance of the Meeting Tent." It is worthy of note that this Word assemble is used in the Scriptures for the first time in the passage when the Lord established Aaron in the high priesthood in Deut 4,10. God says to Moses: "Assemble the people for me; I will have them hear my words so that they may learn to fear me". He mentions the name of the Church again when He says of the Tablets: "And on them were inscribed all the words that the Lord spoke to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly", as if He would say more plainly, "on the day on which you were called and gathered together". And the Psalmist 34,38 says, "I will give you thanks in a great church ecclesia, in the mighty throng I will praise you." (Catechises 18 PG 33, 1044)

All gestures, movements, efforts and endeavours of human beings in need and despair seek a kind of communion, in different degrees, according to the spiritual development of each person. This ontological conscience is innate, not only on the material side, but in every aspect of life. Each feels the inadequacy of his own resources and possibilities, thirsting for completion for affection and support. Whether in the physical sphere or in higher visions, nobody can live in self-imprisonment relying exclusively on his own resources and forces. This communion is not a Christian innovation; it was recognised from the dawn of history by all ancient thinkers. Nevertheless, what distinguishes Christianity is this dimension is the freedom from envy, competition, hatred, contempt, and all the under-developed iniquities that lie sleeping in the depths of our fallen nature and are ready to become aggressive and to claim more and more. If Christianity speaks about koinonia, it seeks to purify hearts from the dangerous elements that are associated with our selfishness and arrogance. And in order to consolidate the highest version of koinonia

so that it may not be polluted by envy, the Church sets up the Eucharist where human shortcomings give place to forbearance, forgiveness, to meekness, to the mystery of the condescendence and humility of a God who offers by this sacrifice the model of humility, universal love and deepening our solidarity towards the weak and the needy. Cyril of Jerusalem developing his catechetical instructions to candidates for Baptism, draws their attention that the Ecclesial gathering, far from having only a sociological and functional character, above all, seeks to incite the gathered - that is the Ecclesia - to become godlike, regenerated beings. For this remains the objective of the convener God, in the early Synagogue and in the Church as well.

The main mission of the incarnate Christ is to bring together those who have been separated, broken, scattered as a result of sin into the unique unity of His Body which is His Church. For this reason, Christ was made man and was crucified. St. Paul states: "I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, so that you, together with all of God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love...." (Eph.3.15).

From the opposite end the Devil does his work by keeping people at a distance from one another, by inspiring them with mistrust and enmity for one another. All this leads to insecurity and a permanent social tension and self-imprisonment. The Devil's job is to break, by any means available to him, the bonds that unite man to God and to each other, consequently perpetuating wars, misery, upheavals and all kinds of destruction. The unifying, reconciling and sanctifying task of Christ is what the Church is commissioned to bring about, particularly in parishes. The very centre of this togetherness, of heaven and earth, and God and the world, is expressed in the short invocation by all participants in the Eucharistic assembly:

"Having besought the unity of the faith and the participation of the Holy Spirit, we commend ourselves and one another and our whole life unto Christ our God".

We must never lose sight of the fact that "going to the church" does not mean to offer exclusive individual petitions and to satisfy completely personal needs, without any reference to the ecclesial body. We go to the worshipping temple in order "to realise the Ecclesial gathering", to behave ecclesiastically. It is the visible realisation of the mystery of Christ's incarnation in order to create step by step, the new Israel, the family of the redeemed. Moreover, the phrase "I go to the Church" means, "I go to the gathering of the believers, so that with them I might build up the Church",

or so that I can manifest anew what I became the day of my Baptism, that is a member – which means, in the full and absolute sense of the word, a member of Christ's body. I go there in order to reaffirm and fulfil my duty as a member, by confessing before God, as well as before my co-worshippers, the mystery of God's kingdom, which is already partly here.

1209 Geneva
Switzerland