

## The Church as Body of Christ: Pavel Florenskij's, *The Concept of Church in Sacred Scripture*

Constraints of space demand finer focusing. Coming from the biblical exegetical field of studies, in this paper I will be concentrating on the parts of Florenskij's book, *The Concept of Church in Sacred Scripture*,<sup>1</sup> that deal with Methodological Considerations and the Dogmatic-Metaphysical Definition of the Church, in the exegetical analysis of Ephesians 1:23, considered by the Russian author as the Biblical New Testament and the Pauline text that best offers this definition.

Florenskij's ecclesiology is definitely one of communion – corporate ecclesiology – hinging on the Church as Body. Like any other body, the Church needs renewal, a renewal that is to be inspired by the mystery of God and his revelation in Christ Jesus.

It is impossible to think that the seminarian Florenskij did not know the vast and fundamental theological merits of the great Filaret Drozdov (1782-1867), who authored the renowned *Extended Christian Catechism of the Oriental Catholic Orthodox Church* (1823, 1839), adopted by all the Greco-Russian Orthodox Churches as their doctrinal text.<sup>2</sup> The *Catechism* deals precisely with the renewal of theology and the Church's teaching, a renewal founded not only

---

\* Paul Sciberras is full-time Senior Lecturer since September 2012, and since October 2013 Head, Department of Sacred Scripture, Hebrew & Greek, Faculty of Theology, University of Malta. He also is member of the Commission for the Revision of the Bible in Maltese.

<sup>1</sup> Pavel A. Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, Classici del Pensiero Cristiano, vol. 15, ed. Natalino Valentini and Lubomír Žák (Cinisello Balsamo [Milano]: San Paolo, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Lubomír Žák, “‘Immaginare la Chiesa Ortodossa.’ Florenskij e il progetto di un'ecclesiologia di comunione,” in *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, 43.

on the introduction of the Russian language within the theological academies, and on his critique of the Scholastic manuals and their method, but also on the struggle within theology for the centrality of Sacred Scripture, read and studied in Russian, not in Latin. Being a biblical scholar by formation, Filaret Drozdov did not limit himself to quote the Bible as a simple proof or witness in his theological works: he “proceeded from the sacred texts.”<sup>3</sup> The originality of the dialectic-symbolic method characterising Florenskij consisted of:

- 1) his peculiar method of interpreting Bible texts;
- 2) his dialectic concerns in his “process” conception of Church, elaborated in a symbolic-revelative key.<sup>4</sup>

The method of knowing must be understood in the intertwining of internal composition and interconnections of elements and levels.<sup>5</sup> It has also to respect the “veil-like” (or “onion-like”) composition of reality, in the sense that, going under the “skin” of a concrete object, it continues to submerge itself in further knowledge from one “veil” or “skin” to the next, deeper, one. In so doing one has to grasp the interconnection between one veil and the next, so that each veil is understood as a way to the next veil, and thus as a place of its hiding and revelation, at the same time. Specifically, within this discourse, the idea of *σῶμα* (*sôma*), body, is that of covering, raiment, veil!<sup>6</sup>

Florenskij posits the foundations of the “dialectic” thought already during his studies in physics and mathematics at the University of Moscow, and *The Concept of Church in Sacred Scripture* represents one of the first attempts of its applications in the field of Theology.<sup>7</sup>

Seeing that the endeavour to define and describe the Church in terms of dogma rests upon the right interpretation of Scriptures, and considering that this method has its own structuring of symbol, Florenskij emphasises the need of “revealing” and of formulating the idea of Church, putting contemporaneously into act three levels of language of dogma: metaphysical, symbolic, and allegorical. These three levels do not have one and the same importance: the dogmatic-

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of intertextuality, see Michael J. Gorman, “Detailed Analysis of the Text,” in *Elements of Biblical Exegesis. A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 109-110; Gail R. O’Day, “Intertextuality,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 155-157.

<sup>6</sup> See Plato’s idea in E Schweizer, “*σῶμα*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:321-325, especially 322.

<sup>7</sup> Žák, “Immaginare la Chiesa Ortodosa,” 83.

metaphysical one represents “the only possible key for understanding the ideas of Church that are present in Sacred Scripture.”<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, with this methodological premise, Florenskij elaborates his reflection on the Church departing from the pericope of Ephesians 1:23, considered, from the formal point of view, “a complete definition of the Church, understood as Body of Christ, that is, as fullness of him who is realised completely in all things.”<sup>9</sup> Trying to penetrate the deeper meaning or ‘veils’ of such a definition, Florenskij refers to other texts – the process of intertextuality – weaving, with their help, an even bigger carpet, identifying the correlations and the interdependencies between the chosen text and other scriptural witnesses, and highlighting their reciprocal interpretation.

### The Dynamics of “The Temple is No More”

Florenskij’s reflection on the Church considers its internal dynamic as that of πάντα ῥᾷ (*pánta hrei*) of numerous and different schematisations of the same reality. I dare say that this is the dynamics of “The Temple is no more,” seeing that both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Bible end with the absence of the Temple (2 Chr 36:23; Rev 21:22), given that “worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him” (Jn 4:23).<sup>10</sup> No single veil is enough or full in itself; no Temple is finite ... indeed, the Temple is no more! It is absent but its function still has to manifest itself in one way or another.

### Methodological Considerations

A premise imposes itself here: the Church is not strictly speaking a human reality; it is above any believer. In scientific circles this sacred veneration in front of the “great mystery” of the Church (Eph 5:32) dons a particular nuance, taking on the form of *utmost prudence*: “Wading in the supernatural order, we must here gird ourselves with the shield of prudence.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah underline in no unclear terms that the holiness of the People of God show the way out to the Temple, even though Ezra 1:1-3 says the same things that 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 does. See, for example, Ezra 8:28.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Jalaguier, *De l'Eglise* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1900).

Filaret Drozdov had given a juridical definition of the Church that was definitely earthly, empirical and legalistic because it was founded on the principle that “just by naming a thing one already gets the idea one has of it.”<sup>12</sup>

Words only envelope the meaning. Therefore in order to get the concept of Church in Scripture one has to study and analyse not only the words in themselves with which it has been expressed in Scripture but also “the emotions that it raises in the spirit, captivating in the words, as it were, some sort of living image, whose spirit remains unaffected only if one comes closer to it without intermediations, in naked spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Observations in our analysis are not preconceived schemas in which we intend to insert the data from Scripture, but they are abstractions from the biblical text itself.

### Dogmatic-Metaphysical Definition of Church

From a formal point of view, a complete definition of Church is to be found in Ephesians 1:23. However, we have first to establish the consequentiality of the preceding thought by the Apostle.<sup>14</sup>

Paul blesses God for his *Heilungswerk*, his work of salvation, whose final aim is to “recapitulate all things, those in heaven and those on earth” (Eph 1:10) in Christ, who is the ἀρραβὼν (*arrabôn*, pledge, Eph 1:14) of salvation. This saving power manifests itself in a fulfilled manner when: “God put this power to work in Christ ... And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:20.22-23).

*All things* have been subjected to Christ, all things are at his feet. But this would be tantamount to coercion. God, on the contrary, wants the *complete transcending* of all things. He has in mind “to gather (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι, *anakephalaiôsthai*) all things in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:10). Thus it does not suffice to him that all things be simply submitted to Christ. An organic union, and not a mechanical submission, is necessary, of which the Church is guarantee. God, Paul states, has constituted Christ as *head* of the Church, rendering her

<sup>12</sup> Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> See, “Narrative Analysis,” in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993), 44-47. For a detailed description of this method, see Jean Louis Ska, “*Our Fathers Have Told Us*”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative*, Subsidia Biblica 13 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), especially 54-63; Edgar V. McKnight, “Reader-Response Criticism,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 179-183.

<sup>14</sup> Florenskij is taking for granted that Ephesians is genuinely Pauline.

*interiorly* bound to Christ: “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23). The Church, thus, exists in complete dependence – interior but also exterior – on Christ, its Head. Inversely: it is because Christ is its Head that the Church is his body, and body not in its contingent signs, but in its substance.

It ensues that, placed at the end of the reflection, verse 23b (that is, the phrase that begins with ἥτις, *hētis*, relative “which”) has a semantically central importance. The copula ἐστὶν (*estin*) can only have a real, literal, metaphysical meaning, to be interpreted similarly as in Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24.

### The Predicate of the Whole Verse: τὸ σῶμα and τὸ πλῆρωμα

In Ephesians 1:23b τὸ σῶμα means the body as the reality that in its highest grade gathers together in itself all that for which all individual bodies are called, so the body in itself - The Body.<sup>15</sup> Paul makes this affirmation by using the least words possible: “The Church is the Body of Christ.”

Σῶμα derives with strong evidence from the Sanskrit root *śka*, in Greek σωσ (*sōs*), that is at the root of words like: σώξω (*sōzō*), σαώω (*saōō*), I cure, I save; σωτήρ (*sōtēr*), saviour, healer; σάος (*sāos*), healthy, integral; ζῶος (*sōos*), σῶς (*sōs*), prosperous, saved; σῶκος (*sōkos*), strong, in health.<sup>16</sup> Σῶμα probably refers to the *casing, covering, wrapping* (veil or skin). Later Greek uses it for an animated body, seeing body as the *receptacle* of life, as against the soul, the contents ψυχή (*psychē*) as in σῶμα ψυχικόν (*sōma psychikón*), the spiritual body.

The Fathers of the Church show that σῶμα indicates the substance, or the material, that united to the soul gives the *form* to the human being in all its entirety. Finally, σῶμα indicates any sort of person united in a whole unity, in a corporative body or σωματίον (*sōmátion*).

Drawing conclusions: σῶμα is submitted to a superior principle, for which it serves as container, wrapping, instrument, cover; it is a passive principle, a receiver, that has its source of action somewhere else,<sup>17</sup> that does not act by itself,

<sup>15</sup> See Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord. A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 508-509. Also, James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 548-552.

<sup>16</sup> See Werer Foerster, “σῶξω, σωτηρία, σωτήρ, σωτήριος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 7: 965-969; also Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1883), *ad loc.*

<sup>17</sup> Normally, the ending of a noun –μα already indicates the concrete result of an action: see Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. A Translation and Revision of the ninth-tenth German Edition

albeit it has a proper reality. In its connotation of dependence, σῶμα has evidently a functional aim, that of instrument through which the action is carried out. In Ephesians 1:22, it means that Christ saves through his Body, the Church. We must here underline that the Church is the saved and saving Body of Christ.

Therefore, σῶμα is identified as a *true reality* (as against ghost, phantasm, appearance, word) that is *instrument*, intermediary (as against an independent reality, self-sufficient, agent and all autonomous) *of salvation* and of any sort of good (as against the instrument that brings damage and evil of all sorts) *for the whole living being and for the individual organs*, in as much as they are linked to the entire organism. The formula: “The Church is the Body of Christ” thus means: “The Church is the instrument of salvation of the Spirit of Christ”, or in sum, “It is the instrument of salvation of Christ.”

Paul states that the Church is τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν πληρουμένου (Eph 1:23b), the fullness of him who fills all in all. Structured, this stich appears as:

ἥτις [ἡ ἐκκλησία] ἐστὶν  
τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ [of Christ]  
τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν πληρουμένου

The same subject, ἡ ἐκκλησία, is the Body of Christ (τὸ σῶμα) and the Fullness (τὸ πλήρωμα) ....

What is the meaning of τὸ πλήρωμα (τὸ plērōma)? From the verb πληρόω (plērōō), it has its roots in the Sanskrit *pul*, to be big, to be with, to be in a mass. Thus, πληρόω would have the double meaning of: 1) to fill, render full, render abundant; 2) to complete, to bring to completion, to fulfil, to accomplish.

From the meaning of πληρόω, the general content of πλήρωμα results is evident, but what about the *modus* of that fulfilment/accomplishment? In general πλήρωμα can be understood as:

- 1) *what* is filled, completed with something, that is, *a passive form and an active meaning*. Thus understood, πλήρωμα is the πεπληρωμένον (peplērōmenon), the one who has been filled. In this case the action of completion has origin in the object given by the genitive;

---

Incorporating Supplementary Notes of A. Debrunner by Robert W. Funk (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1961), 58-59, §109. “-μα properly designated the result of the action as opposed to -σις denoting the action itself,” Carl Darling Buck and Walter Petersen, *A Reverse Index of Greek Nouns and Adjectives*. Arranged by Terminations with Brief Historical Introductions (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1945), 221.



2) *with what* the thing is filled, and thus in πλήρωμα one should see *an active form and a passive meaning*. Thus understood, πλήρωμα = πληροῦν (plērōun) (act of filling), which in this case is directed to the object in the genitive case;

3) in the absolute sense: result of the abstract action (the ending -μα).<sup>18</sup>

Πλήρωμα, understood as the fulfilling or completion, gives us to understand that the Church completes Christ. John Chrysostom explains how this is possible:

The last words of v.23 mean that the Church is completion of Christ just as the head completes the body and the body is brought to completion by the head ... The head is brought to completion only if it is placed in a perfect body. Through all members, therefore, his body is made full. Then the head is fulfilled, then the body becomes perfect, when we are all combined and gathered into one.<sup>19</sup>

So also Theophylact: "Christ finds his completion and appears to complete his members through the believers: his arm will be the charitable person, his leg are they who preach or visit the sick; his other members are the other faithful."<sup>20</sup> Bishop Theophanes writes:

The Church is the completion of Christ just as the tree is the completion of the seed. That which in the seed is contained in reduced form, in the tree it is present in all its development ... Just as the faithful are the Church, it follows that the Church is the fulfilment/completion of Christ, its Head.<sup>21</sup>

The fullness of Christ is fullness of God, and in this sense the Church is therefore seen as the fullness of the Father and his completion. Finally, Christ, being "full" of the divine, one can say the same about him as well: he is completion of the Divine.

If we apply πλήρωμα to the Church and ὁ πληρούμενος to Christ, it will be ascertained that between Christ and the Church there is a relationship of reciprocal determination, on the strength of which the Church is what of Christ it fills itself and what completes Christ at the same time.

The text following πλήρωμα will decide the question of the form of πληρουμένου. But given that in this form the verb πληρόω can form both the

<sup>18</sup> Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, 151-152.

<sup>19</sup> *Homily on Ephesians 3.1.20-23*, in *Interpretatio omnium epistularum Paulinarum*, ed. Frederick Field (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1849-1862).

<sup>20</sup> *Expositio in Epistulam ad Romanos*, PG 124, 404.

<sup>21</sup> See excerpt quoted in Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, 157.

middle participle as well as the passive participle, the issue induces us to turn to τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν πληρουμένου on which πληρουμένου depends.<sup>22</sup>

In Ephesians 1:23b τὰ πάντα (in the accusative case) and ἐν πᾶσιν (dative with preposition) have to be analysed separately. Τὰ πάντα indicates the totality, the entirety of something that is more fully determined than ἐν πᾶσιν, since τὰ πάντα is accusative plural and ἐν πᾶσιν is only instrumental. At the same time τὰ πάντα is certainly the accusative of compliment, depending on the middle participle, and must be translated by an active form with the addition of “in itself”, that is, “for the completion”, for the fulfilment, for the realization of its own plans, of its own intentions.<sup>23</sup>

Τὰ πάντα is the plurality that is made complete and is total unity (to which the neuter points), while ἐν πᾶσιν is only plurality, without the trait of unity. Almost all scholars agree that ἐν πᾶσιν carries a masculine (not neuter) connotation, referring to the faithful (see 1 Cor 12:6; 15:28; Col 3:11).

The meaning of πλήρωμα is fixed when τοῦ πληρουμένου is substituted with its equivalent τοῦ Χριστοῦ, obtaining: τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν πάντων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν πᾶσιν (the completion hoped for by Christ, of all things in everyone). The genitive of the object that receives the action (τῶν πάντων) bound to the genitive of the agent subject (τοῦ Χριστοῦ), both dependent on τὸ πλήρωμα, gives the construct requested. It is τὸ πλήρωμα referred to the *process of the completion*.

The contents of Ephesians 1:23 are therefore rendered as: “the fullness/ completion of everything in all believers through Christ,” that is, the life of Christ (and only of Christ) in regenerated human beings.

The Church is the fullness *par excellence*, the essential fullness, the fullness of substance. The Church is not one of the fullnesses, but The Fullness. Seeing that πληρουμένου carries the article τοῦ, in this case it means that the action of filling is not only found in relation to the subject of action (Christ), but is attributed to him as something that is substantial to him (and proper to him). Therefore: τὸ πλήρωμα (the fullness *par excellence*, the only fullness of energies and forces, that therefore has impressed in it the essential traits) τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν πληρουμένου (of him who fills everything in everyone), that is, of Christ, of him whose body she is and whose head he is.

---

<sup>22</sup> See Stefano Romanello, *Lettera agli Efesini*. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento, I libri Biblici. Nuovo Testamento (Milano: Paoline, 2003), 10:73-75; also Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura*, 159, completely contradicted by Romanello, *Lettera agli Efesini*, 74.



## **Conclusion**

Florenskij analyses the definition of the Church not on the founding text of Matthew 16:17-19 – controversial on many fronts for different denominations – but on the text that depicts the nature of the Church in Ephesians 1:23. In so doing, the Russian theologian understands the Church as a living organism, rather than pointing to its founding historical moment.

Paul Sciberras  
Department of Sacred Scripture, Hebrew, and Greek  
Faculty of Theology  
University of Malta  
Msida MSD 2080  
Malta

paul.sciberras@um.edu.mt