

## A TIME OF RECKONING FOR THE CHURCH

### *Theological Reflections on the Tragedy of the War in Ukraine*

#### I.

Russia's war against Ukraine grinds on, and, as the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America has stated, "no Christian can remain impartial or lukewarm in the face of the suffering or remain silent when confronted with such evils as are being perpetrated."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, no amount of geopolitical, political, and historical argumentation can justify the continued murder of Ukrainians and their displacement by the millions, the historic landmarks destroyed, and cities hobbled. Meanwhile, the Russian Federation claims to be conducting a "special military operation" designed to curb the Ukrainian appetite for independence. For its part, the Russian Church's leadership openly endorses this war as the necessary extension of a "metaphysical struggle" to defend the "world of Rus" against Western moral decadence. Both the president and the patriarch question the fundamental legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood.

As a result, apart from the world's scorn aimed at Russia's president—and leaving aside the absurd "cancellation" of Russian artists and cultural artifacts—vast tracts of the Orthodox world, as well as the wider Christian world, hold the Moscow Patriarchate in contempt. The prophetic conscience of the Russian Church speaks today most eloquently through the courageous voice of hundreds of Russian clergy who, in the name of the Gospel and in solidarity with their fellow Orthodox in Ukraine, are denouncing the war against Ukraine as well as the oppression of anti-war voices in Russia: "Concerned about the salvation of every person who considers himself a child of the Russian Orthodox Church, we do not want them to appear at this [Last] Judgment bearing the heavy burden of mothers' curses."<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that, from the start of the invasion,

<sup>1</sup>"Statement on Ukraine," available online: <https://www.oca.org/holy-synod/statements/holy-synod/statement-on-ukraine>.

<sup>2</sup>"'Stop the war' Russian Orthodox leader on why hundreds of 'brave' priests are

the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Metropolitan Onuphry (in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate until May 27, 2022) has stood and suffered with the Ukrainian people, supporting the suffering, the grieving, the wounded, and the displaced. Theirs is, indeed, the most vulnerable situation: (a) suspected of ecclesiastical disloyalty, because, unlike their patriarch, they do not parrot the Russian state propaganda; and (b) viewed with hostility by the Ukrainian state, which sees this Church under the Moscow Patriarchate as a potential agent and propagandist of the invading power. Meanwhile, after some five months of war (at the time this editorial goes to print), many Orthodox churches in Ukraine have been damaged or destroyed as a result of Russian military actions.

This war is not only a humanitarian catastrophe and a failure of modern political institutions. It is a great scandal for all Orthodox Christians, as two nations with massive Orthodox populations are fighting and killing one another, after one nation suddenly and treacherously attacked the other. Moreover, the unambiguous moral cover granted this endeavor by the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate is not only deepening the divisions within the Orthodox Church; it is sowing seeds of distrust, disillusionment, and even apostasy within the Church worldwide. We will all pay a high price in loss of credibility for generations. But the theological distortions undergirding the justification of this war are bringing to light older and deeper problems that we have all allowed to fester in our Christian conscience for decades and even centuries, and with which the Orthodox Church must grapple if it is to remain a faithful witness of the crucified and risen Christ.

## II.

One of these distortions is an increasingly untenable vision of a pure and spiritual East against a corrupt and secular West. This simple binary, widespread not only in Russia but throughout the Orthodox world, conveniently forgets that, on issues such as abortion, alcoholism, domestic abuse, political and economic corruption, the conditions in hospitals, in institutions

joining his campaign,” available online: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/stop-the-war-russian-orthodox-leader-on-why-hundreds-of-brave-priests-are-joining-his-campaign/12651.article>.

for the elderly, the orphans, and the disabled, and in prisons, the overall situation in Russia and Eastern Europe gives no reason for boasting. It is impossible, in any case, to understand how the problem of “corrupt Western values” can be solved by military means, by the taking of life, including the innocent lives of Ukrainian children born and unborn. Finally, we as Christians do not promote “Eastern” values but Christian values, and we as Christians do not stand against a corrupt West, but we pray and strive to be delivered from corruption, beginning within ourselves. To cite Solzhenitsyn’s famous words (paraphrasing those of Dostoevsky), “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties (nor, let us add, between East and West) but right through every human heart . . .”

### III.

Another distortion is the impulse of churches to claim ownership of their flocks beyond their borders. Christians are, first of all, “citizens of heaven” (Phil 3,20); in the present age, they “have no abiding city” (Heb 13,14), but are, as Saint Clement of Rome writes in the opening of his Epistle to the Corinthians, “the Church of God *sojourning*” in the various cities and countries of the earth. Second, from a canonical point of view, the Church organizes itself according to place, not language or blood—although, of course, the pastoral work of a local church will, if it is carried out in genuine love, accommodate itself to the needs of those it serves. From this vantage point, the distortion consists in inverting the proper order of Christian reality, making “Orthodox” into a mere qualifier, a “religious” detail added to an identity constructed along ethnic and political lines.

It is this distortion that underlies the attempt to justify the current war as an operation protecting Russian or Russophone populations, and of promoting Russian interests, far beyond the boundaries of the present Russian Federation—extending beyond Ukraine to Belarus, the non-Slavic Baltic States, Moldova, and other former Soviet republics. It is frightening to see Russian political irredentism receiving ecclesiastical endorsement through the public pronouncements of Moscow Patriarchate bishops. This ideology is not so much an expression of nostalgia for the Soviet Union as it is a nostalgia for Russia’s imperial past, in a time before the advent of modern

nation states. Whether one likes it or not, Ukraine as a sovereign nation exists as surely as do Greece, Germany, Italy, and all the other states that have come into being in the modern era; and Orthodox ecclesiology has always shown that, whatever the makeup of a country's people, its church life and structures must ultimately grow out of and reflect local boundaries and realities.

But just as the facile East/West binary plagues most if not all the Orthodox churches, so does this tendency of churches to claim ethnic communities outside their locality. The pan-Hellenic dominance from Constantinople to the Holy Land, to Mount Athos, to Africa, and throughout the so-called "diaspora" is too often accompanied by claims to Hellenic superiority that have little to do with the Gospel. Throughout the Orthodox commonwealth, the so-called mother churches strive to "own" and "conserve" their ethnic diasporas everywhere in the world, often while pointing the finger at what other "mother churches" are doing. Some even seek to enshrine this foreign ecclesiology in their official documents—see, for example, the Romanian Orthodox Church ("Statutul BOR," art. 5). In short, it is a troubling reality that most Churches in the Orthodox world have themselves imbibed the kind of ethnocratic logic on the basis of which the Russian state and ecclesial authorities deny the legitimacy of an independent Ukraine. The difference in the present situation is not one of kind, but of degree—albeit a massive degree.

#### IV.

In sum, the prophetic and pastoral failure of the Moscow Patriarchate is the acute manifestation of deep-seated ills that plague much of the Orthodox world. Nationalist tendencies reflect *a crisis of synodality* in the Orthodox Church worldwide. But the Church also suffers from *a crisis of catechesis* and from the dilution of its ascetical and ethical character: how else can political and military passions and simplistic East-West binaries so overwhelm the mind of self-proclaimed Orthodox Christians, that spilling the blood of another people (let alone of fellow Orthodox) be deemed acceptable? And the Church suffers from *a crisis of leadership*: leaders of the various local Orthodox churches have repeatedly shown a predilection for accommodating rich, powerful, corrupt political strongmen by forgetting

its traditional critique of wealth and power, muting its prophetic voice, and narrowing its eschatological and catholic horizons to a myopic focus on history and nationhood. This is painfully obvious in the many cases in which Orthodox hierarchs have accepted to make common cause with totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in the promotion of ethnic pride and the regulation of public morality, too often at the expense of the freedom and dignity inherent to all those created in God's image.

On none of the above-mentioned points can any hierarchy, theologian, or local Church claim the moral high ground or the right to lecture others. The unpleasant truth is that most local Churches have allowed these ailments to poison the life of Orthodoxy for decades and centuries, thus creating the ideological premises, and shaping the ethos of the actors involved in today's war. There are, certainly, degrees of complicity with error and evil. And it is true that elevating blood, language, and national history over Baptism and liturgical and ethical formation does not *always* result in widespread violence and death—but the current war reminds us how easily it can.

## V.

It is clear that our perception of the war is colored by the traumatic two years of COVID pandemic, by the ever more acute ideological division of Western societies, with the attendant erosion of the credibility of anything coming from any perceived “opposite side,” by the (justified but uncritical) suspicion of news coming from corporate media conglomerates and uncritical adoption of all kinds of “alternative” news and commentary. Some Orthodox Christians can speak passionately about the geopolitical game among NATO, Russia, and China (usually repeating Moscow's talking points), while callously declaring themselves agnostic or skeptical about the atrocities committed by Putin's army in the cities and towns of Ukraine. The only way to see through the dense fog of war, disinformation, and ideological *parti pris*, is a by fundamental commitment to not ignore the many witnesses—*credible* witnesses: Metropolitan Onuphry, who spoke overtly about the grave sin of the Russian invasion; several bishops in the same UOC (MP), who document these daily atrocities and who overtly deny Moscow's assertions about “liberating Ukraine from Nazis”; the hundreds

of Russian priests who signed the anti-war petition; the millions of Ukrainians forced to flee their country. Can a Christian conscience simply ignore the witness of these people, who have nothing to gain and everything to lose?

As teachers of Orthodox theology who here, in the West, have the privilege of being free to believe and worship without coercion from the State, we feel morally compelled to speak openly about the realities that propaganda, ill-will, and indifference would like to minimize, relativize, and obfuscate: the invasion of Ukraine, which is exacting a tremendous toll of death, suffering, loss, and destruction, and the conflation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the state interests and geopolitical ideals of the current Russian political regime. Nevertheless, we find it important to state, speaking as Orthodox Christians, that we should not fancy ourselves innocent of complicity with the very ideas and practices that are fueling the war in Ukraine, and we should not pretend that such complicities are only a thing of the past.

We have much to repent of, and much work to do.

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## CONTENTS

EDITORIAL: A TIME OF RECKONING FOR THE CHURCH ..... 5

### Articles

ORIGEN'S TITLES OF CHRIST:

THE *EPINOIAI* (ΕΠΙΝΟΙΑΙ) AND POWER CAUSALITY

Micah M. Miller ..... 11

*HYPOSTASIS* AND *ENHYPOSTATOS* IN NEO-CHALCEDONIAN

CHRISTOLOGY: MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, LETTER 15

Calinic Berger ..... 39

FROM TRANSUBSTANTIATION TO INNER LITURGY:

THE EUCHARISTIC DOCTRINE OF FR DUMITRU STĂNILOAE

Marius Portaru ..... 73

THE RECEPTION OF DOM ODO CASEL'S *MYSTERIENLEHRE* IN THE  
LITURGICAL MOVEMENT AND IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Joost van Rossum ..... 105

The 39th Annual Father Alexander Schmemmann Memorial Lecture (2022)

SALVATION AS LITURGY: ALEXANDER SCHMEMMANN'S LITURGICAL  
THEOLOGY AND THE RENEWAL OF THE JOY OF SALVATION

Khaled Anatolios ..... 143

### Theological Essays

"IT SHALL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU":

ORTHODOX WITNESS AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

Metropolitan Tikhon ..... 167

THROUGH THE LATTICES

Mihai Vlad Niculescu ..... 173

UKRAINE: A THORNY PAST AND A TRAGIC PRESENT

Andrew Louth ..... 185

POST-BYZANTINE HISTORY, CULTURE, AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH:

A CONTEXTUAL READING OF IORGA'S *BYZANCE APRÈS BYZANCE*

Gaelan Gilbert ..... 195

Book Reviews ..... 217

Notes on Contributors ..... 249