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978-0-521-09147-3 - Theology in the Russian Diaspora: Church, Fathers,
Eucharist in Nikolai Afanas'ev, (1893-1966)

Aidan Nichols

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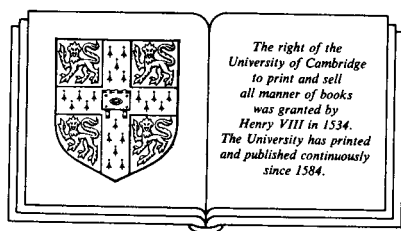
CHURCH, FATHERS, EUCHARIST IN

NIKOLAI AFANAS'EV

(1893–1966)

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Preface

The founder of the Order of Preachers looked to the East, and since his lifetime, Dominicans have figured prominently in the relations of the Latin and Oriental churches.

Though it was from the tomb of saint Dominic that this work burst forth, it was already there in seed in the venerated Patriarch's attraction to the Gospel, and to the *Conferences* – so Palestinian in flavour – of Cassian, as well as in Dominic's ardent desire to preach to the peoples of the East.¹

In the lifetime of the first Dominican generation, contact was made with Eastern Christians through the founding of a Province 'de Terra Sancta' in 1228.² Finding Eastern churches in a situation of ruptured communion with the Holy See, they naturally devoted themselves to the work of reconciliation. A number of clergy and laity of the Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian churches resolved on full union with the see of Rome through their efforts.³ In the difficult circumstances following the Fourth Crusade of 1204 the Order established a presence in the world of the Chalcedonian Orthodox also, laying the foundations of the 'Latino-phrone' movement of Byzantine theologians in the fourteenth century.⁴ At some point in the later 1220s, Jacek Odrowar, known in the West as Hyacinth of Cracow, journeyed to Kievan Russia, though his work there left no lasting result.⁵ Contact with the Armenian church in first Cilicia and then Greater Armenia produced more substantial fruits, and the *Fratres Uniti Armeniae* would endure as a Dominican congregation until the eighteenth century.⁶

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In view of all this activity, it is not surprising that the Order committed itself enthusiastically to the project of a reunion Council. Peter of Tarantaise's contribution to the making of the 1274 Second Council of Lyons was such that on the death of Pope Gregory X, he was elected to the papal office taking the name of Innocent V.⁷ Thomas Aquinas was on his way to the Council when he died, leaving behind him the little treatise later entitled 'Contra errores Graecorum'.⁸ That title does less than justice to the irenic fashion in which St Thomas approached the Byzantines, and follows a literary fashion set by the Carolingian divines in the *Filioque* dispute of the ninth century.⁹ While it is only a false ecumenism that slurs over obstacles to unity, a useful corrective might have been found in the *Opus Tripartitum* of the master-general Humbert of Romans.¹⁰ In this memorandum submitted to the 1274 Council, Humbert not only criticised the Latin church for its failure to communicate its own position intelligently. He also claimed freedom for the Orientals in whatever did not touch the dogmas of faith.

In the mid fourteenth century, the expansion of the Polish State under Casimir the Great permitted Dominicans to work in Little Russia where by 1612 the Province of Russia possessed seventy houses, three of them beyond the Dniepr. The work of the Dominican Veniamin in translating the Bible into Old Russian for the use of the (Orthodox) church of Novgorod in the late fifteenth century is a splendid example of ecumenical cooperation in an age when reunion was fraught with dangers.¹¹ The Council of Basle in sending John Stoikovič of Ragusa to Constantinople in 1431 looked ahead to the Reunion Council of Florence eight years later.¹² At that Council John of Turrecremata (Juan de Torquemada) played a major part, defending the eventual decree of union in his *Apparatus super decretum Florentinum unionis Graecorum*.¹³ After the failure of reunion, the retention of a Dominican presence on certain Greek islands where Catholic and Orthodox populations lived side by side proved of help to Eastward-looking Dominican scholars in the seventeenth century.¹⁴ Thus Jacques Goar was enabled by his period as prior of San Sebastian in Chios to study the rites of the Greek church which led to his *Euchologion*

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of 1647, the herald of a number of studies of Byzantine history later in his life.¹⁵ About the same time, two other French Dominicans, François Combefis and Michel Lequien, were producing editions of the Greek Fathers, including such early Byzantine figures as Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene, while Lequien's *Oriens Christianus* is a storehouse of material on the history of the Eastern churches.¹⁶

While the partition of Poland in 1733 led to the formation of a new Province *Utriusque Galiciae* in Habsburg Ruthenia, the sun-dering of the Russian houses from their natural motherhouse at Lvov led to a slow decline. By 1917 only the house in St Petersburg remained, more as a basis for chaplaincy work among foreign diplomats than as an integral part of Russian society.¹⁷ However, the founding of the Dominican sisterhood of Mother Ekaterina Sienskaia Abrikosova in Moscow at the end of the old régime showed the attraction of the Dominican charism to Orientals determined to maintain their spiritual and liturgical inheritance in Catholic union.¹⁸ In 1923, at the request of Pope Pius XI, the Order took charge of the Russian–Byzantine seminary at Lille, while in 1927 the Province of France founded the still extant centre *Istina*, an *équipe* devoted to the search for ways to reunion.¹⁹ Its journal, originally entitled *Russie et Chrétienté*, and now bearing the name of the centre itself, provides a useful service of information and reflection on ecumenical relations, its spirit well summed up in the *Voies de l'unité chrétienne* of its founder, the Archimandrite Christophe Dumont.²⁰ From visits to *Istina* and the bi-ritual monastery of reunion at Amay-sur-Meuse (later Chevetogne) emerged the ecumenical vocation of Père Yves Congar. Congar moved into the brilliant Russian circle in Paris which included on the Orthodox side Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev and on the Catholic side André Gratieux who introduced Congar to the ecclesiology of Aleksei Stefanovich Khomiakov.²¹ Khomiakov's thought bulks large in the background of the theology of Nikolai Nikolaevich Afanas'ev, the subject of this work. I would like to see this book as a modest contribution to this great Dominican tradition in East–West relations.

The author who is at its centre, the Russian priest-theologian

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Nikolai Nikolaevich Afanas'ev, will emerge as a key figure in the *rapprochement* of Christian East and West, and notably of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Principally, this is owing to his recovery of an ancient intuition, rediscovered by the Catholicism of the Second Vatican Council, thanks not least to the influence of Afanas'ev's work. As Pope John Paul II has written: 'Thanks to the Council we have realised with renewed force the following truth: just as the Church "makes the Eucharist", so "the Eucharist builds up the Church".'²² Such a 'eucharistic ecclesiology' is, in the ecumenical context, the crucial feature of an 'ecclesiology of communion', itself the principal form of the Catholic Church's self-understanding in the contemporary period, as the Extraordinary Roman Synod of Bishops of 1985, called to celebrate and to evaluate the results of the Second Vatican Council, would show. An ecclesiology of communion, as now practised, may be described as a eucharistic ecclesiology which has been extended so as to show the christological and Trinitarian foundation of Church and Eucharist alike. The value of a eucharistic ecclesiology lies in its deriving the ministerial, and therefore the governmental, structure of the Church from the pattern of her eucharistic life. In so doing, it suggests how we should understand the relation of the local church, which celebrates the Eucharist in a particular place, to the universal Church, the *Catholica*.²³ The Eucharist is always celebrated by a particular group, yet that which is so celebrated is, in fact, the Eucharist of the *whole* Church. The local church, therefore, manifests the plenitude of the Church – yet only in the measure of its communion with all other churches. Each church is, in a degree, responsible for all the others, sharing with them its own experience and 'receiving' their testimony of faith. The churches are in the words of M. Olivier Clément, an Orthodox disciple, in these matters, of Afanas'ev, 'eucharistically consubstantial', but that consubstantiality is conditioned by the identity of their faith.²⁴ It is this unity-in-diversity which is at the foundation of the synodal or conciliar element in the Church's life.

In this total exchange, an exchange founded both on a common sacramental reality and on a common doctrinal faith, certain

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particular churches have a special position. They are – once again in Clément's phraseology – 'centres of accord'. And here we meet, after the Eucharist as foundation of the Church, the second vital *motif* in Afanas'ev's theology which this book will bring out – its contribution to an Orthodox understanding of the rôle of the Roman church and bishop in a united Church. Quite properly, Afanas'ev contextualises what he, as an Orthodox, has to say about the Papacy in a general account of primacy as such. In every 'centre of accord', a bishop enjoying primacy exercises special concern for the unity, in both life and faith, of the surrounding local churches, presiding in love among them. But may there not be, then, a centre of accord for all the churches, with their bishops, a unique, geographically unbounded presidency in love crowning the hierarchy of lesser, regional presidencies which are its analogues? It is a striking feature of contemporary Orthodoxy, at least in many of its manifestations, that it is willing, for the first time since the Council of Florence of 1438–9, to look seriously again at such a possibility. From the Catholic side, there is a pressing need for a theology of the Petrine ministry of the Roman bishop which will distinguish clearly between his regional presidency in the Latin church, the patriarchate of the West, and the universal presidency in the Charity of all the churches. Many of the interventions of the Roman pope and curia which generate accusations of 'over-centralism' against the Catholic Church are, ecclesiologically speaking, of a *patriarchal* kind, and it should not be thought that, in observing the contemporary Western Catholic scene, the Orthodox are necessarily hostile to such a strong patriarchal government. Thus Father John Meyendorff, the historian of Byzantine and mediaeval Russian Christianity, considers that, in Latin Christendom, the authority of Rome is under challenge not, primarily 'in the name of an "ecclesiology of communion"' but in the name of secularism and Modernism'.²⁵ If this be true, then the present historical conjuncture in the Western church, that of the post-conciliar crisis, is hardly propitious for further experiments in dismantling the inherited structure of the Roman patriarchate – even though the enormous geographical extent of that patriarchate, given the

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missionary successes of Latin Christians, certainly indicates that, at some future point, the creation of new regional primacies is desirable. The situation of the West, however, need not be extrapolated to the East. The separated Eastern churches neither want nor need such government themselves, as though the Church were but one enormous extension of the patriarchate of Rome, the whole the part. Afanas'ev's proposals suggest how the church and bishop of Rome might play a real, and not simply honorific, rôle in the sphere of the churches of the East, and one that would correspond, in a quite different ecclesiological idiom, to the claims of 'universal primacy of jurisdiction' made at the First and Second Councils of the Vatican, without confusion of such patriarchal and universally primatial rôles. It is of more than incidental concern that some future reform of the Roman curia should take this distinction into full account: it is gratifying to see that Latin canonists are beginning to plan along these lines.²⁶ Since no Catholic–Orthodox *rapprochement* is feasible without such a rethinking of the ecclesiological traditions of the separated churches, it is to this *re-lecture* that the present study is devoted.

In what follows, considerable stress will be laid on the rôle of consonance with the patristic witness in the evaluation of a theological vision. This is in accordance with the words of the Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon who, as representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, had this to say at the inauguration of the Orthodox–Catholic dialogue at the patriarchal monastery of St John on Patmos on 29 May 1980:

We have come to Patmos, the place of apostolic theology *par excellence*, first of all to listen, not to speak; to rediscover the theology of the apostles and of the Fathers of the undivided Church, so that we may all return 'to the Word of God and to the testimony of Jesus'.²⁷

At the same time, it must be recognised that the history of tradition has continued to unfold. Thus the witness of the Fathers to the Word of God in Scripture has itself been appropriated in different historical conjunctures, so that certain themes have been more privileged in one strand of Church tradition than another. So Cardinal Jan Willebrands, replying to Metropolitan Meliton, rightly pointed out that:

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Although our churches have received the same faith, they have developed this Christian patrimony in different ways or fashions . . . These different evolutions are encountered in all domains of the Church's life: in the tradition of worship and spirituality, in discipline, and in the manner of expressing, presenting and organising reflection on the mysteries of the faith.²⁸

Hence Afanas'ev's ecclesiological 'return to the Fathers' will be contextualised here within the Russian Orthodox theological tradition both as antedating his work and as contemporaneous with it.

Such a patristic *ressourcement*, especially when seen against the backdrop of an entire ecclesial tradition, cannot but highlight the common elements in the patrimony of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. In this way, an essay in historical theology, conducted eirenicly, serves the purification of the Church's memory by charity: a major *motif* in the 'common declaration' of the ecumenical patriarch Demetrios I and Pope John Paul II in announcing the setting-up of the Orthodox–Catholic Theological Commission at the Phanar on 30 November 1979.

The dialogue of love, rooted in a total fidelity to the single Lord Jesus Christ and to his will for his Church, has opened the way to a better understanding of our respective theological positions, and, by that very fact, to new approaches where the shared past of our churches is concerned. This purification of the collective memory of our churches is an important fruit of the dialogue of love, and an indispensable condition of future progress. This dialogue of love must continue and intensify in the complex situation we have inherited from the past – the situation which constitutes the wider reality in which our present-day efforts have their place.²⁹

This *refraire le contexte*, which is the responsibility of the Christian historian, as well as of the Church's pastors, then enables a *refraire ensemble les textes*, for which the work of the dogmatic theologian is a necessity. Thus this study looks not only to the past but to the future, to the ecumenical prospect of full eucharistic communion in a single, conciliar and Petrine Great Church.

Owing to the massive presence of Russian Christianity within the Orthodox world, it is especially appropriate that the source of

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these ideas – a eucharistic ecclesiology leading to the affirmation of a unique ‘church in priority’ – should himself have been Russian. For in Russia lies the key to the reunion of Catholic West and Orthodox East, the special position of the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople–Istanbul notwithstanding. Although that patriarch may well be called on to play a part in the reintegration of the Russian church, divided as this has been since the Revolution of 1917 into the two allegiances of the Moscow patriarchate and the Synodal Church in Exile, both the geopolitical position of Russia, and the sheer numbers of its believers, give it, inevitably, a unique place. As a student of the ‘Eastern Politics of the Vatican’ has written: ‘The master-key for unlocking all opportunities, be they for the Vatican’s, or anyone else’s Eastern policy, was to be found in Moscow.’³⁰

It is a matter of joy that the publication of this book should coincide with the opening of the Soviet Union to a greater humanism which appears to be bringing with it the promise of a new freedom for the churches. For this holds out the possibility not only of new opportunities for the hitherto suppressed Slav-Byzantine church of the Western Ukraine and the persecuted or, at any rate, disabled Latin churches of the Baltic States, Belorussia and Soviet Eurasia, but also for the restoration of unity between the Orthodox of all the Russias and the see of Rome. May some of those alive today live to see the remaking of that single communion into which Vladimir of Kiev was baptised, and the Christianisation of Russia begun, an event whose millennium is kept this very year.

I must thank my supervisors, The Very Revd Professor John McIntyre and The Revd Fr. Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, OCD, for their kind advice during the writing of the doctoral thesis on which this book is based. Père Yves Congar, OP, greatly encouraged me to persevere with this topic: this work is offered to him, in fraternal homage. Looking back over a longer period, I find that my love for Orthodoxy was stimulated by two Oxford friends: the Archimandrite (now Bishop) Kallistos Ware and the late Nicolas Zernov whose widow, Militza, with great kindness, gave me

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access to his wonderful collection of Orthodox theological literature at Northmoor Road. Professor Henry Chadwick passed on something of his own fascination with the patristic Church through writing, lecturing and touching personal concern. Professor Dmitri Obolensky gave me my first acquaintance with the patristic afterlife of the Byzantine world. The Revd Dr (now Professor) Rowan Williams found time among the many calls on his energies to check and correct my translations from the Russian. My prior, Father Robert Ombres, OP, shared with me his sense of the ecclesial significance of the 'holy canons'. Many friends in Rome, in the Pontifical University of St Thomas (the Angelicum) and in the *curia romana* gave me a sense of the universal ministry of the Holy See in the service of what the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom calls 'the peace and welfare of the churches of God, and the union of them all'.

In the revision of the text for publication, I am greatly indebted to the erudition and acumen of The Revd Lewis Shaw of the Cambridge Divinity School. Miss Katharine Hodgson of the Department of Slavonic Studies, Cambridge, kindly provided the transliteration of Russian names and terms; those from the Serbian were rendered by Father Stjepan Kراسић of the Angelicum.

Blackfriars, Cambridge,
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