

The Grace Which Heals That Which is Infirm

I am a “cradle” Orthodox Christian and I have been an Orthodox priest for over a decade. Over the last twenty years or so, I have been astonished by the rise of Orthodox Christian fundamentalism which was never present in the Church when I was growing up. Now, as a priest, I find myself continually battling fundamentalism in all its covert, rigorist, and legalistic forms. I am always asked by catechumens whether or not they will have to be “re-baptized” or “re-married” because they know of people to whom this has happened. I find myself continually defending the *basic practices* and *standard teachings* of the Orthodox Church. In my studies of the problem of fundamentalist re-baptism and re-marriage, I found the basis of my refutation in, of all places, the prayers of ordination. It was then that I came to realize that the real problem lies in a failure to recognize the grace and operation of the Holy Spirit.

When a priest is ordained, the ordaining bishop says these profound words to the ordinand:

The grace divine, which always heals that which is infirm, and completes that which is wanting elevates, through the laying-on of hands, (*Name of ordinand*) the most devout Deacon, to be a Priest. Wherefore, let us pray for him, that the grace of the all-holy Spirit may come upon him.¹

When a Deacon is ordained, the bishop says the exact same prayer except in this case he ordains “...the most devout Subdeacon, to be a Deacon.”² In these prayers of ordination, uttered throughout the centuries, we are reminded that it is the Holy Spirit who is present and who acts in all of the sacraments of the Orthodox Church. The Holy Spirit, through His grace, is able to make all things new.³ These concepts, so foundational in the teachings of the Orthodox Church, appear to be lacking, ignored, or perhaps even rejected by fundamentalist Orthodox! It explains why they insist upon re-baptism and re-marriage of Christian converts to Orthodoxy. However, a simple examination of the teachings of the Church quickly reveals their errors.

Most of us can correctly identify that the Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. As such the Holy Spirit is divine just like the Father and the Son. So, we know who He is, but what does the Holy Spirit do? There is no better source to answer this than the very hymnography of the Church where we find the very theology of the Church expressed in many rich and diverse ways. I am going to focus on one small set of hymnography called the *anabathmoi* that are sung at Orthros on Sunday mornings. These

hymns are but a tiny fraction of the hymnography related to the Holy Spirit. Here's what they tell us.

- Verily all creation together is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and returns to its former being; for he is coomnipotent with the Father and the Word.
- The Holy Spirit is the fount of all wisdom; for through Him comes grace to the Apostles, the Martyrs, by Him are crowned in their struggles, and the Prophets in foreknowledge look to Him.
- With the Holy Spirit every gift is good; for He shines forth together with the Father and the Son; and in Him all creation lives and moves.
- By the Holy Spirit every spirit shall live and shall be purified, ascending and brilliant, through the one hidden and pure Trinity. The Holy Spirit overflows with streams and passages of grace and waters all creation with refreshing life. By the Holy Spirit comes the riches of divine knowledge, divine vision, and wisdom....
- Verily the Holy Spirit is the element of life and its beginning; for through Him does every living thing breathe....
- Verily, through the Holy Spirit is everyone made divine; and in Him is pleasure, understanding, safety, and blessing....
- By the Holy Spirit was existence bestowed on all creation; for He is of the Godhead before existence, and He is the unapproachable Light, the God of all, and their life.
- By the Holy Spirit every divine one sees and utters things to be and performs heavenly wonders; for he sings to one God in three....

One other important source, the Trisagion prayers, tell us that the Holy Spirit is the Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who is present everywhere and fills all things; He is the treasury of blessings and the giver of life. The Holy Spirit is a busy person regenerating, enlightening, purifying, deifying, illumining, comforting, dwelling in, and enlivening not only us but all of creation.

Since the Holy Spirit is divine, then He, together with the Father and the Son, is a source of the *divine energies* which are fundamental to how Orthodox Christians explain how God interacts with creation. One Orthodox theologian describes them as

...not something that exists apart from God, not a gift which God confers upon humans; they are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world. God

exists complete and entire in each of His Divine Energies. (...) In relation to us humans, the divine energy is in fact nothing else than the grace of God.⁴

Here, we learn the important concept that the divine energies and grace are one and the same. Divine energies = grace. How do we receive God's grace? The Orthodox theologian, John Karmiris states that the

...justifying and sanctifying divine grace which abides in the church is administered by the church to the people by means of the holy mysteries, which are divinely instituted ceremonies that deliver, by visible means, mysteriously transmitted invisible grace. Thus it is that the sacraments, when they are worthily received, become instruments, means of transmission, of divine grace. (...) This is accomplished in all who are truly faithful by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Orthodox Christians dogmatically teach that grace is the experience of the divine energies which are poured out from all three persons of the Holy Trinity. That healing and fulfilling grace/divine energy comes to us in the sacraments of the Church.

God → Divine Energies = Grace →^{Sacraments} Church

A Christian convert to Orthodoxy first receives the infirmity-healing and void-filling grace of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Chrismation. In the anointing with the Holy Chrism, the convert experiences a personal Pentecost⁶ in which the Holy Spirit is poured out on the person receiving the sacrament. In this sacrament we all become "Christs" and temples⁷ in whom the Holy Spirit lives and acts.⁸ If, as the ordination prayer states, the Holy Spirit is the source of grace which heals what is infirmed and completes whatever is lacking, then does that not apply also to sacraments received outside the confines of the Orthodox Church when a person is chrismated? According to our own Orthodox theology, it must be so.⁹ Therefore, as a pastor, I explain to my converts that upon Chrismation and the reception of the Holy Spirit everything in their Christian past will be completed, healed, and "Orthodoxized." Rebaptism is not necessary because any valid¹⁰ Christian baptism is completed, healed, and made "Orthodox" by of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Remarriage is not necessary because a prior Christian marriage is completed, healed, and made "Orthodox" because of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Those who insist upon re-baptizing and re-marrying Christian converts to Orthodoxy are in effect denying the grace of the Holy Spirit and denying the divine energies of God. They reduce the sacraments of the Church to “magic spells.” Only if the spell is done correctly by Geronta Dumbledore using the correct Byzantine rite “spells” can the magic happen. Baptizorazmus! Matrimonius! It is Hogwarts with beards and vestments. The Orthodox fundamentalists refuse to acknowledge that it is not the sacramental act itself, but the Holy Spirit in the sacrament who regenerates, enlightens, purifies, deifies, illumines, comforts, and enlivens that which is lacking or infirmed from one’s Christian past. Do I dare say that in re-baptizing and re-marrying converts the fundamentalists are blaspheming the Holy Spirit? Yes, I do. And as such they are committing an unforgivable sin against God, the Church, and those to whom they deceive.

¹ Service Book of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church according to the use of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America. 10th Ed. (Englewood, NJ: Antakya Press, 1997), pg. 234 (*antiquated verb tenses modified by author*).

² *ibid*, pg. 231.

³ ref. Rev. 21:5

⁴ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition (Penguin [non-classics], 1993), pg. 68.

⁵ John Karmiris, *A Synopsis of the Dogmatic Theology of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, trans. George Dimopoulos (Scranton, PA: Christian Orthodox Edition, 1973), pg. 100.

⁶ Thomas Hopko, “The Orthodox Faith, Vol 2: Worship” (Syosset, NY: Department of Religious Education, 2006), pg. 30.

⁷ ref. I Corinthians 3:16

⁸ Hopko, pg. 30.

⁹ As much as I would like to discuss this because of its relevance, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the reception of convert clergy from the Roman Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches. The canons and practices of the Orthodox Church in regard to this matter derive from the same logic used to refute re-baptism and re-marriage of converts. In the Slavic, Greek, and Antiochian traditions, Oriental Orthodox clergy are received in orders meaning that we not only recognize their baptism and chrismation, but also their ordinations as valid. In the Slavic tradition, even Roman Catholic clergy can likewise be received in orders. For more on this, I invite you to read. “The Problem of Sacramental ‘Economy’” in John H. Erickson, *The Challenge of our Past*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Valid meaning baptized with water (immersion, effusion, or sprinkling) in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.