

IN SEARCH OF THE MEANING OF *OIKONOMIA*: REPORT ON A CONVENTION

In recent times, Western theologians have shown an increasing interest in the meaning of *oikonomia*, which is an integral part of the tradition of the Eastern churches, especially of the Greek Orthodox Church.¹ No doubt, the East has preserved precious elements from our common tradition, elements that have been somewhat forgotten or neglected in the West. Further, the Spirit may have given them insights which, for their depth and breadth, should be spread far and wide.

Today, when Western theologians are faced with seemingly intractable issues, often they turn toward the East for inspiration and ask: "Is there not a hidden wealth in the practice of *oikonomia*? Could it help us to solve our problems?" They have in mind practical issues, such as "Can *oikonomia* be invoked to solve the problem of intercommunion among divided Christian churches?" Or, "Can a church which believes in the sacramental ordination of bishops recognize the ministry in other churches where no such rite exists?" Further, "When a sacramental marriage fails and there is no hope of restoring the union, can the Church, through *oikonomia*, dispense the partners from the first bond and permit them to enter into a second one?" Similarly, "If a man and a woman are living in a union which cannot be made canonically valid, can the Church accept their repentance and receive them in full Eucharistic communion, without asking them to give up their marital life?"

Because such questions are so widely debated in the West, and the practice of *oikonomia* is so deeply rooted in the East, the Society of the Law of the Eastern Churches chose the meaning of *oikonomia* as one of the principal themes of its Fifth International Congress, held at the University of Thessaloniki from September 22 to 27, 1981.²

CONGRESS PAPERS

Five papers were presented on that topic: three by Greek Orthodox scholars who were in the order of episcopate as well, hence *oikonomoi*,

¹ For a competent introduction to the Orthodox tradition of *oikonomia*, see "La notion d'économie et ses richesses théologiques" by K. Duchatelez in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 92 (1970) 267-92. An excellent bibliography completes the article.

² The congress had two principal themes: mixed marriages and *oikonomia*. Here I report only on the talks and discussions on *oikonomia*, very much a theological issue. The full proceedings of the convention will be published in the series entitled *Kanon*, the yearbooks of the Society of the Law of Oriental Churches; its headquarters are in Vienna (Gesellschaft für das Recht der Ostkirchen, Institut für Kirchenrecht, Universität Wien, Dr. Karl-Lueger-Ring 1, 1010 Wien, Austria). The Society has presently 158 members; there were some 80 present at the congress. Its next meeting is planned for September 1983 in Freiburg in Br., Germany. The theme will be "The Bishop and his Eparchy."

dispensers of *oikonomia*; one by the dean emeritus of the Roman Rota, with distinguished record in historical scholarship and administration of justice; another one by the Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of Eastern Church Law. Discussions followed the conferences. The participants, especially from various Eastern churches (Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, Russian, Bulgarian, and others), were often able to broaden the information gained from the lectures.³

By the end of the convention, we all had a great deal of reliable information as to how *oikonomia* is practiced in the Eastern churches, how it can lift a burden from the community, and how far it can go. Of course, no one thought that we had exhausted the topic. Nor can it be said that, after all the explanations were given, the craving of the Latin mind for clarity had been satisfied. But there was freshness in the talks and debates; we learned much from one another.⁴

The keynote address was given by Panteleimon Rodopoulos, Metropolitan of Tyroloe and Serention, Rector of the University of Thessaloniki. The better part of his talk was an answer to the question "What is *oikonomia*?" He discarded the possibility of any precise definition; he gave a description of its function. Here is a summary of his talk.

The need for *oikonomia* arises when there is an apparent conflict between the claim of the law and the call of the Christian spirit. For instance, an illegal act may have caused a rupture in the life of the community, and there is a demand to heal the wound to avoid further contempt for laws, or another breach of peace, or even violence. When the community is so aggrieved, those in charge can, indeed should, act as good *oikonomoi*, stewards of God's household. They should heal the social body; they should disarm the threat of revolt by steady gentleness. Such intervention is rooted in a mysterious power that has its origin in the saving word of God and in the action of the Spirit. The *oikonomoi* are the bishops, either in their dioceses or gathered in synods at various levels, provincial, patriarchal, and ecumenical, depending on the importance of the issue. Biblical, patristic, and synodal sources do not leave any doubt either about the presence of this power in the Church or about the capacity of the bishops and synods to use it.

The use of *oikonomia*, however, has its limits. It cannot go against

³ The congress had two official languages, Greek and English. In giving the titles of the talks, and in transcribing Greek names and words, I follow the official English version of the program.

⁴ The hospitality offered to the participants was generous and exquisite, not only on the part of the local organizing committee presided over by Metropolitan Panteleimon Rodopoulos, but from the ecclesiastical and civil authorities of Thessaloniki and beyond. Moreover, the talks and discussions manifested a strong ecumenical spirit. On the last day of the congress all were invited to the Holy Liturgy at the Basilika of St. Demetrios; the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki officiated.

dogma. It must not include the use of wrong means, not even for a holy purpose. Nor should it be a source of scandal for the community. Within these negative limits, the intervention should always serve a positive aim, such as peace in the community, the salvation of souls, the spiritual benefit of all concerned.

Finally, since every need for *oikonomia* arises out of an individual situation, each use of it is unique. It cannot and must not serve as a precedent for future actions.

Pierre L'Huiller, the Orthodox Bishop of New York, presented a paper on "*Oikonomia* in the Tradition of the Orthodox Church." He began with a warning: no simplistic approach can do justice to this complex issue. He lived up amply to his own principle and went through a wealth of historical material to reach an understanding of *oikonomia*. No summary of his analyses and interpretations of so many significant documents can be given here, but his final conclusion and position can be stated.

L'Huiller found no convincing evidence that *oikonomia* traditionally meant derogation from the law. It meant an exception from a general norm, whenever the law itself authorized such exception. Hence, there was no antinomy between *akribeia*, the exact observance of the law, and *oikonomia*, the prudent observance of the law. In each case there was a law to be observed. Perhaps a quote from the Bishop's manuscript, distributed to the participants, explains his thought better than my own summary:

The modern theory—which has never enjoyed a real consensus— . . . [which in] the alternative application of *akribeia* or *oikonomia* takes opportuneness into consideration—is in complete contradiction to the canonical conception of the ancient Church. In effect, for the ancient Church, the essential forms of discipline constituted an intangible legacy, going back to primitive Christianity. As Fr. G. Florovsky correctly observed, the extensive and amorphous theory of *oikonomia* was born in a period of decadence in Orthodox theology. A sane reaction, happily, is now coming into being. A balanced explanation of the concept of *oikonomia* is found in the excellent "Joint Statement" promulgated by a conference between Orthodox and Roman Catholics in Washington, D.C. in May 1976.

That there can be a plurality of views among Eastern theologians was proved by the fact that the Bishop's understanding of *oikonomia* was challenged from the floor.

Bartholomeos Archontonis, Metropolitan of Philadelpheia, from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, gave the closing speech on "The Problem of *Oikonomia* Today." The following is a summary of his thoughts.

The sources for determining *oikonomia* are to be found, first, in the Christian literature of the first eight centuries, that is, before the seventh

and last ecumenical council; second, in the attitudes, words, and actions of the Orthodox Church toward heterodox communities; third, and somewhat remotely, in the attitudes of the heterodox churches toward other churches. Some firm principles emerge:

1) *Oikonomia* belongs to the very essence of the Orthodox Church. It is permanent with the permanency of the Church. But it cannot be defined; it is a lived reality, not reducible to a precise concept. As in the Church there is stability and flexibility, so it is with *oikonomia*. The primary purpose of the Church, the salvation of human beings, is unchangeable; so is *oikonomia*, which serves the same purpose. But as the Church can take on a new attitude, e.g., today it carries on an ecumenical dialogue while before it did not, so *oikonomia* can take new forms responding to new needs.

2) *Akribeia* belongs to the very essence of the Church, too, in the same way as *oikonomia* does. *Akribeia* means a holy exactness, even strictness, in the observance of the law. It is practiced principally at the holy Mount Athos, where it is considered the expression of the purest love. Both are authentic manifestations of Orthodox tradition; they mutually balance each other. One cannot exist without the other.

3) *Oikonomia* must never wrong dogma. But we should distinguish between dogma and its interpretation. In the case of interpretation, *oikonomia* can be used. There are the classical examples. The great Athanasius tolerated the use of the Latin term "person" in Trinitarian theology notwithstanding that he judged it an incorrect translation of *hypostasis*. Basil refrained from insisting on the divinity of the Holy Spirit to save his church from unwanted interference by secular authority, and also out of compassion for those who were weak in their faith.

In the ecumenical dialogue *oikonomia* can be used. Indeed, the Church of Rome used it recently, by not insisting on the insertion of the word "Filioque" into the Creed.

The issue of intercommunion in the Eucharist could serve as an illustration of the right and wrong use of *oikonomia* in matters involving dogma. Three opinions are proposed today:

a) Intercommunion is legitimate only if there is full communion among the churches. Such a position is certainly *akribeia*: it is the exact observance of Orthodox traditions; it is theologically well grounded.

b) There should be intercommunion or open communion among Christian churches as a means of achieving unity. Such a position is not the correct application of *oikonomia*, since there is no unity among the churches in reality. It tries to introduce *intercommunio* under false pretenses; this is like introducing paper currency without the backing of gold value—inflation will follow. To accept intercommunion before union

would be to wrong a dogma of faith which says that there should be communion in the one Church, not among divided churches.

c) Intercommunion is permissible in prayer and liturgical practices, in the mutual recognition of the validity of the sacraments. Indeed, it has become fairly common practice, especially at ecumenical gatherings, for Orthodox and heterodox Christians to pray together, even in liturgical celebrations, excluding the Eucharist. As regards the sacraments, their validity can be mutually recognized through *oikonomia*, but to admit their validity is not the same as to share them with a heterodox community.

A final note: *oikonomia* is not the same as the Latin "dispensation." It is more theological, less legal.

Metropolitans Rodopoulos and Archontonis left no doubt that for them *oikonomia* was a theological reality right at the heart of the Church, rooted in the living power of the Spirit, ever present in the community. Their view commanded much support among the Orthodox theologians present.

In contrast, the Latins' *epieikeia* appeared as conceptual, definable, and thoroughly juridical in the paper "The Theory of *Epieikeia* in the Latin Tradition," prepared for the convention by Prof. Charles Lefebvre from Rome (not present by reason of illness). His study was partly historical, partly theoretical, always within the horizons of Western canon law. He presented *epieikeia* as a subjective prudential judgment about the nonapplicability of the law in special circumstances. He distinguished it from "equity," which he saw as an objective judgment by public authority, a new rule of law for a particular case.

Clearly, there was little in common between the Orthodox speakers' theological description of *oikonomia* and Lefebvre's legal analysis of *epieikeia*. In spite of the similarity of some terms used, there were two worlds of vision, two radically differing methods of approach.

Prof. Ivan Zuzek from Rome gave a report on "*Oikonomia* in the Present Consideration of the Papal Commission for the Oriental Churches." The consideration, of course, is in view of the new Code, intended for churches of Eastern rites which are in communion with Rome, a project of the Holy See. Zuzek made the point in the beginning that the *oikonomos* is the one who takes care of the household, and the purpose of the new Code is precisely to take care of God's household. Hence, in his view, the very existence of the Code will be a response to the demand of *oikonomia*. Further, he reported that after much discussion the members of the Commission decided that nothing should be said in the future Code about *oikonomia*, partly because it is not a juridical concept, partly because its function is covered by similar institutions, such as dispensation, *sanatio in radice*, and others.

During the discussion after the report, one member of the same commission there present expressed his regret that the tradition of *oikonomia* has not been incorporated into the projected new Code. Personally, I was wondering if the commission's position was not closer to that of Bishop L'Huillier than to that of Metropolitans Rodopoulos and Archontonis. I felt also that a very similar report could have been given on the work of the commission for the revision of the Latin Code of Canon Law; that too takes care of God's household, that too incorporates the same "equitable" institutions such as dispensation, etc. Yet the Latins do not have *oikonomia*!

After the convention was concluded, I had two questions in my mind: (1) What is *oikonomia* in the Orthodox tradition? (2) What can the Latin Church learn from the Orthodox tradition? I soon discovered that I had no precise answers. But I kept reflecting on the issues in the following vein.

OIKONOMIA IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

I noticed that the minds of the Orthodox theologians turned spontaneously from the abstract idea of *oikonomia* to the concrete person of the *oikonomos*; that is, they kept bringing a person into the focus of their consideration. For them, the central question was "What can the *oikonomos* do?"

The *oikonomos* is always in the order of the episcopate; he may be acting individually within his territorial competence, or he may be acting collegially as a member of a synod. Synods exist at various levels according to the organization of the Church.

The *oikonomos*' task is to take care of God's household; this is *oikonomia* in a broad general sense. An act of *oikonomia*, in a strict and specific sense, is always prompted by an extraordinary situation, by a conflict that cries out for a solution, by a wound that is in need of healing. It is an extraordinary gesture in the business of taking care of the household. There are limits to it: it must not wrong dogma, ever. Hence, before the *oikonomos* acts, he must determine whether or not he is free to move. He cannot do anything against revealed truth. Another limit in the use of *oikonomia* is that it must be balanced by the practice of *akribeia*. There is no hard and fast rule as to how this equilibrium is to be accomplished, but it must be there. As long as *akribeia* is practiced at Mount Athos, there is room for *oikonomia* in Thessaloniki.

As the Church lives and evolves in history, so does the practice of *oikonomia*. A precise definition would strangle it; openness is an essential quality of it. A definition is impossible, then, but with the help of modern cognitional theories we can go perhaps further and grasp the nature of the power of the *oikonomos* better: his horizons always extend beyond

the limits of the law. He searches for the understanding of the purpose of the Church—indeed, of God's purpose in the Church. Keeping his eyes on the Savior of mankind, the *oikonomos*, too, tries to save what has gone amiss. He operates out of a certain creative intuition.

Oikonomia thus springs from the contemplation of the saving power of God. Because the understanding of that power cannot be exhausted, the conceptual limits of *oikonomia* cannot be drawn either. The Church cannot enclose in a definition its own potential for growth.

OIKONOMIA AND THE LATIN CHURCH

Oikonomia, as it is understood in the Orthodox Church, does not exist in the Latin Church. The legal institutions of *epieikeia*, equity, dispensation, *sanatio in radice*, the legitimation of children, supplementary jurisdiction, and so forth, are not equivalent, not even closely analogous, to *oikonomia*. They are radically different. They exist and function within the world of law, never beyond. They are ordinary tools of law and order, even if some of them are rarely used. They are perfectly definable; their effect is unfailingly predictable. If in their application a personal judgment is required, the person's field of action is restricted to the determination of the facts of the case and to the application of the law. He must remain within the confines of the world of law. Quite to the contrary, the *oikonomos* must go out of it, right into the world of mysteries.

Although many definitions of *oikonomia* circulate in the Latin Church, hardly any of them can be accepted as representing the complex reality existing in the Orthodox Church. They can be deficient under several aspects. For example: (a) They do not mention the absolute limitation the Orthodox never cease voicing: *oikonomia* should not wrong dogma. (b) They do not advert to the need to balance the use of *oikonomia* with the practice of *akribeia*, since the two together make up the life of the Church. (c) They focus on the abstract idea of *oikonomia* and not on the person of the *oikonomos*, who is entitled to represent the Savior beyond any legal description. (d) They forget the historically evolving character of *oikonomia* and present it as a crystallized juridical institution. At any rate, a servile transplantation of *oikonomia* from the Orthodox Church into the Latin community is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, the Orthodox tradition should serve as an inspiration to us Latins, first to create a favorable environment for *oikonomia*, and then to build up the practice of it.

Oikonomia can flourish only if the balances between the world of mysteries and the world of law are well conceived and correctly arranged. This means that every law, and the legal system as a whole, must be in the service of the mysteries and not vice versa. An example can illustrate

this thought better than any explanation. There is the mystery: the Son has come to find and to save sinners. It follows that every law concerning the administration of the sacrament of penance should correspond to this evangelical image. If the laws work in the other way, that is, they make it difficult for the minister to approach the sinner and compel the sinner to fulfil harsh conditions before he/she is forgiven, something has gone wrong with the evangelical message. This small example is meant to point to the great issue: a community cannot ever come to the practice of *oikonomia* unless in dispensing mercy it has learned to go beyond the confining limits of the law. An overwhelming emphasis on the law, at the expense of freedom to search the mysteries, brings forth a climate in which *oikonomia* cannot flourish.

Further, the building up of the practice of *oikonomia* will depend on the ongoing contemplation of God's saving power in the Church, on our increasing understanding of the sovereign strength of His Spirit there. Dogma should not be wronged in the process, but this Orthodox rule cuts the other way too: whenever there is no dogma, the use of *oikonomia* (in the strict sense, meaning an extraordinary intervention) should not be impeded. To give a small example again: an *oikonomos* may come to the judgment that the saving strength of God may heal a sinner (say, a divorced and remarried person) to the extent that he/she can be received again into Eucharistic communion. After all, the Savior who came to *forgive* sins can also *forget* the union from which nothing remains beyond sad memories. There is no limit to his saving power, and the *oikonomos* can interpret it.

Often the Latin mind shies away from such solutions; they may lead to lawlessness and disorder. The Orthodox mind moves right to the heart of the saving mystery and does not fear the collapse of the law, which is meant for ordinary circumstances. *Akribeia* is there to uphold the legal system, *oikonomia* has the courage to go beyond it.

In conclusion, perhaps this much can be said: *oikonomia* is not a precise norm of action, as the *seemingly* similar Latin institutions are. It is a way of life in the Christian community. It is grounded on an increasingly contemplative understanding of God's saving power. Logically enough, as long as something remains to be known about that power, *oikonomia* cannot be defined.

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