

The Ethnic Parish: Its Past and Future

The Ethnic Parish and Its Prototype in New Testament

Before we discuss such a phenomenon as the ethnic parish we should define the term itself. What exactly is an ethnic parish? The ethnic parish appears in history at the apostolic time, at the very beginning of Christian Church. And at this time it seems to be a problem for the main Church. First Christian community was Jewish. Hence, the first Christians were Jews. Even if we take into consideration St. Luke's story from the Acts of the Apostles about the multitude being the witnesses on the day of Pentecost, all of them were "devout Jews" and "converts to Judaism" (Acts 2, 10). The newborn Christian Church was secret messianic gathering, eschatological sect inside Judaism. "Twelve" created the center of the young community, which Paul will call later "The Israel of God" (Gal 6, 16). They did not interpret the words of Jesus as hostile to the Law of Moses and therefore continued to keep it. Many of them still belonged to Pharisees. Everyday they attended the Sanctuary. Luke's story about the life of the first Christian Church ends with the information that they did not leave Jerusalem, and the Sanctuary still played the major role in their lives (Acts 5, 42).

If the first Christians in Jerusalem had interest in the Gentiles, this interest reflected only the old prophesy about the new eschatological age when all the Gentiles and Jews from Diaspora will gather around the mountain Zion to praise God (Pss 21, 28; Isaiah 2, 2-3; 56, 6-8; Zechariah 14, 16; Tobit 13, 11, est.). Therefore the new community did not recognize itself as something new, something different from Judaism. Its members did not feel any difference between themselves and other Jews. They have just seen themselves as a fulfillment of Judaism, as the beginning of eschatological Israel. Probably even Jerusalem's authorities did not think this group of Jews different from other orthodox Jews.

This idyllic and peaceful community, the very first Church of Christ, the Mother of worldwide Christianity was very close to the same as what nowadays we call ethnic community. Even if this group of people did not see themselves as Christians (Jesus' followers will call themselves by this name much later) and this community did not look like what we name today by the word "Church" we still should admit that the first Church of Christ was ethnic.

As we see in the history of the early Church, told very carefully by Luke, the situation have tragically changed by the beginning of the mission of Paul, which he undertook between Gentiles. The Church of Jerusalem became hostile toward Paul what we see from the letter to Galatians written by Paul himself. The conflict was so critical that Luke even tried to soften it in his story (Acts 15, 1-2; 21, 20-21).

Later, when Christianity has spread to other places it still has had ethnic character. Christians of Jerusalem and Palestine insisted on circumcision of all the converts. In his turn Paul answers in a strongly-worded way calling them "false brothers... who slipped in to spy on our freedom... that they may enslave us" (Galatians 2, 4) or "the dogs" (Philippians 3, 2). Paul's opposition to Jewish-Christians was not only his personal resistance to unfriendly brothers in Jerusalem. It was an opposition between ethnic Mother Church and arising universal, missionary Church that will "make disciples of all nations" (Mathew 28, 19), the Church as we see it nowadays.

Paul defended his own vision of Christianity and his mission, which was applied to Gentiles, “the uncircumcised” (Galatians 2, 7). He proclaims the freedom from the domination of Moses’ Law and condemns the interpretation of the Law as the way to righteousness (Galatians 2, 16 - 5, 12). In his vision, the way of slavery of the Law is not the way of the gospel, and those who preach it are “false brothers” for whom would be better to “castrate themselves” (5, 12) than to upset others by their demands to follow the Law.

The same furious attack Paul undertook in his second letter to Corinthians (10-13). It is clear that those he had been attacking have seen themselves as Christians and even called themselves “ministers of Christ”, “apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11, 13. 23). But from Paul’s point of view they preach a “different gospel”, “another Jesus” and therefore they are “ministers of Satan”: “deceitful workers, who masquerade as apostles of Christ”, “false apostles” (11, 4. 13-15). Defending a vision of universal and multicultural character of the Gospel, Paul even provokes a conflict with the apostles, “the pillars” especially with Peter and James. Paul’s position is strong: when Kephias came to Antioch “he was clearly wrong”, he and “the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically”, even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy, “they were not in the right road in line with the truth of the gospel” (2, 11-14).

The conflict in Antioch shows that Paul and the community of Jerusalem were close to breaking off their relations. Many historians of the early Church believe that it was a moment of the first confessional dissidence of Christianity (E. Haenchen, *The Book of Acts as Source Material for the History of Early Christianity*, SLA, p. 264). It was not personal conflict between “Twelve” and Paul or between the Mother Church and the new founded communities. It was a conflict between two visions of Christianity: ethnic messianic beliefs of Jewish-Christians and universal understanding of the Message of Jesus by converts from the Gentiles. After A.D. 70 this conflict marked the relations between Christian and Jewish thought everywhere (J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, v. 1, p. 13).

If we take a look at Christianity of the second half of the second century we will see a totally different picture. Jewish-Christianity is not the only one form of Christianity. Even more: it is often interpreted as unorthodox and heretical. At this time there were already at least four Jewish-Christian groups whose teaching was not the same as the preaching of appearing Great Church (like ebionites, Jewish-Christian sect).

Jewish-Christianity was neglected because in the process in which the Church was growing, developing and then changing Jewish-Christianity did not do so. And here we can see the tiny border, which divides heresy from orthodoxy. Jewish-Christians could pretend to be adequate to the first form and faith of Christianity and have for it much more rights than for example Paul. If the first Church is a norm or example of the purity of orthodoxy, Jewish-Christians could pretend to be a perfect form of Christianity. But Jewish-Christianity was rejected by the Main Church. Why? Christianity was developing when Jewish-Christianity still remained in very beginning, in the context of ethnic Judaism. Then we can conclude: heretical Jewish-Christianity is Christianity which has stopped in its development, petrified and inadequate to the goals of Christianity at the new epoch.

Ethnic Churches and their Genealogy

By the year 100 Christianity was represented in Asia Minor, Syria, Macedonia, Greece and the city of Rome. It may have been present in Egypt. Asia Minor was unquestionably the most extensively Christianized territory of the Roman Empire at this time. There was one Christian Church for whole oicumene – meaning “one world” -- which was limited by the borders of the Empire. A few centuries later the Church of Rome will undertake the great effort of bringing Christianity to the tribes in Western Europe (historically the most important evangelization was provided in the British Isles and in the Frankish Kingdom).

The fact that the number of Christians continued to grow and the geographical area of Christianity was spreading brought about the changes in the organization of the Church. One of the most important developments of this era was the improvement of the structures of the Church above the local level. The first council of Nicaea presupposed that the bishops of each civil province would be associated together in synods for the regulation of matters of common interest and invested the bishop of each provincial capital special status and powers. This system of Church administration was shortly established in the entire East, except for Egypt. In the West it developed more slowly. Above the provincial or regional level, the most important institutions were established: the patriarchal sees and the ecumenical councils. By the time of council of Chalcedon, the number of patriarchal sees had been fixed at five: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. There were not only churches, which could traditionally claim apostolic foundation, but also churches located in economic, political and cultural centers. Of equal importance was the fact that each of them presided over an area that represented a significant degree of linguistic and cultural cohesion. Rome was a patriarchate of the Latin West. Antioch and Alexandria belonged to those areas of the Roman Empire where the common tongues were Syrian and Coptic. Constantinople established itself as the patriarchate of the Greek-speaking world of Asia Minor and Greece itself.

The ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries were the era during which Christianity has spread to not only Scandinavia, but also predominantly to Central Europe and the Balkan peninsula. In most cases, it went hand in hand with the cultural and political reconstitution of societies. The great missionary achievement of the ninth century was the conversion to Christianity of the Bulgarian and Moravian kingdoms. Quite at the same time begins the missionary work of two brothers – Cyril and Methodius – representatives of Greek faith and culture, who as natives of Thessalonica, were speakers of Slavonic. It was the special contribution of these two missionaries that they began the process of translating the Christian scriptures into Slavonic, for which Cyril devised the first alphabet of that language – an enterprise that laid the foundations of Slavonic Christian culture in the Balkans and in Russia as well.

Cyril and Methodius “were anxious to give to the Slaves the whole body of Byzantine liturgical texts in their own language” (F. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slaves: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, p. 247). This ambition was met with strong resistance from German missionaries in Moravia because Western evangelization presumed Latin as the language of holy texts. Nevertheless the Slavic-language mission succeeded and opened the new page of the history of Christianity. At in this way the problem of the triangle of the holy languages of Christianity (Jewish – Latin – Greek) was solved and Byzantine church opened the door for new nations with their very

different and unique cultures. The problem of development, which became fatal for Jewish-Christianity once more was overcome by the Church.

This short outline of the Church history I presented is not chronological and misses the fullness of multiplicity of its events. My only goal was to present the interior tension between stagnation and dynamism in the Church's life and its mission. The problem, which met the missionary efforts of Cyril and Methodius, will appear again and again. The Russian Church that received its right for national and cultural identity with a struggle was to face the same problem. In XIX century with the beginning of the evangelization of the small communities in Siberia, and later in Alaska, there appeared a problem of the translation of the Holy Scripture and liturgical texts into the native languages. Through the centuries Church-Slavic language has had acquired the image of holy language as well as it was centuries ago with Latin or Greek. And once more Church overcame this problem preaching eternal and always new Gospel. In this brief picture we also see the way in which Church from the ethnic community became to be a multicultural family of different ethnic Churches.

Appearance of the Ethnic Parish

The ethnic parish as we know it nowadays is not a new situation. Even at the time of Byzantine Empire ethnic parishes have existed being established by traveling merchants. Legend tells that before Russians were baptized, in their major city of Kiev there has already existed Greek churches. The purpose of their existence of course was to serve Greek merchants. The legend tells that Russian great Princess Olga secretly received Christianity and was baptized in one of such churches. Also when bigger groups of Christians moved --- either being forced to relocate or for other reasons --- they used to establish the their parishes and build their churches and very often the natives did not interfere in their religious life.

This old situation still remains new. As one of the best examples of it we have a history of Christianity in America. The Pilgrims that arrived into this continent very often came in here escaping from the difficulties in the religious life they have met in their own countries. Such kind of parishes do exist around all over the world but here in United States the phenomena of the ethnic parish is a very important part of the history of this country. Unique ethnic features that create the character of each of them are different and depend of national tradition the parish is bound with. Nevertheless the most important elements in their life are common to each of them.

It is extremely interesting field for anthropological and theological research especially in such a religious situation we have in New York. Protestant parishes with German roots are neighbors of Greek Orthodox Parishes in a neighborhood called Astoria, Queens. The patron of Roman Catholic cathedral in New York is St. Patrick and Roman-Catholic Irish New Yorkers treat it as an Irish parish and annual Irish parade always begins at the doorsteps of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Let me focus on the life of a Russian parish. But first I would like to underline the obvious fact that life in the Russian parish is not much different from other ethnic parishes even if it carries some special characteristics, which are formed by unique character of Russian culture.

Cultural Background of Ethnic Parish and Universalism of Christianity

As I stressed before, ethnic parish is a result of immigration. From their home place people travel to another country, which has its own history and culture. Very often they do it unwillingly --- being forced to by economical, political or religion problems. In a new cultural environment they want to preserve their national identity that binds them with the relatives they left behind and in general with cultural tradition they have been raised in. National identity is something you cannot change as a tie. It forms the shape of what we call human personality. It is a very interesting fact that many of the new immigrants come to the Church for a first time not for religious purpose, but to support their national identity with what they believe the Church can give them. Only then being in familiar cultural environment they ask themselves a question about their religious beliefs. It would be abnormal if these people did not bring with them their own secular visions of life of the Church. This situation is true of course only for parishes, which are receiving new parishioners who came from secular countries such as the former Soviet Union. Most of them were baptized as children by their grandparents --- we can recall famous Russian *babushki* --- but who have never been catechumens because they did not receive any Christian education.

This situation needs a lot of work from the priest and the whole community to educate them and to help them to create their Christian formation. As His Beatitude Metropolitan Herman said in interview for Russian Orthodox magazine *PUT*:

“With all these immigrants coming in, they also need to be given instructions, so we are... trying to preach them in Russian. And especially I know that even at the monastery and several of our churches where there are people that have come from Russia and have become members of the Church which really are not familiar with the teaching of the Church because either there were baptized by their grandparents or whatever, and we need to make sure now that we have priests that will be able to give them the proper instructions in their language... And I do not think anyone should be denied their language, and no one should be denied their traditions” (*ПУТЬ*, №2, c. 10).

In this context we can define an ethnic parish as a parish that keep the tradition of the national Church its members came from. These traditions apply mostly to liturgical life, such a calendar or a language of the liturgy, and usually are overstressed. Here appears major problem that is characteristic for the ethnic parish and that cannot be avoided. I mean the problem of communication of a single ethnic parish with a main Church (by “main Church” I mean in here worldwide Orthodox Church and local Orthodox Church in America as well).

As we have already discussed, one of the first problems new born Christianity experienced was the conflict between conservative Jewish-Christianity, which defended its ethnic character and universal dynamism of the growing main Church. Unfortunately, this problem remains current for every ethnic Church in history and continues today. It is characteristic for the ethnic parish to be concerned that there is only one right and true tradition in Orthodoxy, which is their own. Other traditions more or less are spoiled or even heretical. Others have to learn from us because we keep the only correct form of Orthodoxy. The national form of Orthodoxy was immutable for such a long lime and became sacred. It is understandable that the only way to preserve the national tradition is

to avoid the changes. Here appears a conflict with universal character of Christianity and there is no clear way it could be settled.

Fr. Alexander Shmemann in one of his letters about liturgical reform in OCA has written that there is certain danger in trying to provide uniformity into liturgical practice. In the worldwide orthodox scale such uniformity does not exist. Therefore in Orthodox Church in America which is unique in its multiplicity of traditions and is a symbol of unity of Orthodox Church in America can not make one tradition, be it Russian, Greek or Romanian, as the standard for others. Fr. Shmemann suggests that there is a possibility to discover and adopt the elements of the Orthodox liturgical tradition, which are universal for Orthodoxy and will work in very special situation of OCA. But even so this great theologian and liturgist expected a certain amount of variety in the liturgical practice of some parishes.

“As we see in the history of the Church, such a variety disappears only when Church is dying and its liturgy discontinues to be life and a source of life what we can call *rigor mortis* (freeze with death)” (*К вопросу о литургической практике. Письмо моему епископу, 1972*).

Ethnic Parish at the Time of Globalization.

As we have seen, the resolution of the problem of Jewish-Christianity brought into the life multiple ethnic parishes that with time gave a birth to national churches which survived through the centuries and were bound very closely with the history of their countries and sharing the destiny of their nations. It is true quite for every local church. Even more. The local churches were forming national culture and national character. The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova once said: “If you see the icons of Andrey Rublov in iconostasis in Troitse-Sergieva Lavra, you will foresee that in this nation will appear Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.”

Through the centuries, the Church was inspiring spiritually the creation of national culture. And now we can see cultural treasures every national church created and which Orthodox Christianity is proud of. The Church not only inspired cultural development but many times also was the only power that saved national identity of its country. The best example of it is history of Russia in XX century. The nation, which over seventy years survived genocide performed by its own atheistic government, seemed to be totally devastated. Atheistic ideology of government had as its goal the creation of a new generation of people --- the Soviet people, and quite succeeded in this work. But after the fall of the Communist regime, when all moral orientation was lost and the people born in the Soviet country did not know other values than atheism, the Church gave them Christian values and inspired a national Christian Renaissance we are all amazed of.

As I said, national churches survived through the centuries creating national values and being a foundation for nations and countries they were bound with. But time is changing the face of the world. Modern people less and less are thinking in national categories. Economical and political development created the world in which it is impossible to be independent from other countries and nations. Modern technologies eliminate problem of distance. The phenomenon of globalization has appeared. The Church does not live in a vacuum; rather it consists of real people that live in a particular time and place. All the changes of culture and civilization make an influence on their beliefs and religious experience. It was always this way (See: J. Rossler, *Vom Jagen zum Wissen*.

Zivilisatorische Sprünge, Brüche – und die religiöse Entwicklung, “Christ in der Gegenwart” 2001, v. 14, p. 107-108).

We live in a time of the great change. Industrial civilization transforms into civilization built on knowledge. Human knowledge is supported by intelligence of cyber technologies. Knowledge is more important than energy by itself or natural resources, or even work. And knowledge has become a marketable commodity. Man uses his own intellectual potency and deepens his knowledge about himself: Discovering his own genetic code, he unravels it. Thousands of years ago, man achieved consciousness of himself and now he is becoming conscious of his own knowledge. Now he can create his own copy --- the clone of himself.

The question of future becomes more and more important. Where are we going? This question is addressed also to Christianity and to its ancient institutions. It is not possible for Christianity to preserve its former shape in the face of post-industrial civilization. Christian faith has to experience coexistence with a culture in which the main role is played by potency of knowledge and success. Process of secularization of the world forces Christians to take a fresh look at the gospel and its message.

Very often the changes in the Church happened too late, when many people have already left or became indifferent. Often Church was not able to listen to the voices of criticism that were coming from outside or from inside, from the people with a deep responsibility for the Church. There is no religion that has absolutely excellent modern forms, doctrines, structures or rites. Dream about the Church, which is excellent is utopia in every point. It is very easy to be tempted by absolutism of what is only human tradition and of what Jesus was warning his disciples (Mark 7, 8-13). He also was telling that “true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (John 4, 23) and that God seeks for such people to worship Him.

Apostle Paul wrote centuries ago: “The world in its present form is passing away” (1 Cor 7, 31). We should say the same about Christianity and the Church today: it is passing away, this ethnic image of the Church we are familiar with. Religious conciseness has to change and it will not be easy. In modern religious life there are elements of drama and this religious drama is not less tragic than it was at the time of Cain and Abel, Moses, the prophets or Jesus from Nazareth. The Christian Church has survived through centuries and Jesus promised us it survives until the end of the time. Have hope the Church will survive challenges of the modern epoch when human knowledge dominates.

The lessons of past are very instructive. But the first challenge the Church has to overcome is a conflict between cultural conservatism and universal character of Christianity. The first reflex in front of globalization of the world is to close in the own cultural tradition. And as more powerful is the pressure of the world, the more conservative and fundamentalist Christianity becomes. It is visible already as ethnic groups of Christians curse the modern world. There is wide spectrum of topics: cloning, contraception, feminism, globalization, abortion, etc. But the problem is not even that the world does not want to hear it --- the world ignores the voice of Christianity. The world does not need the lamentations of Christians. At the beginning of third millennium we see the growing gulf between the Church and the modern world; but also growing is the disintegration between groups of Christians belonging to different cultural traditions. The ecumenical movement that carried so much hope at the beginning of XX century failed. In the Christian churches of all denominations the voices of conservatism and

fundamentalism are becoming stronger. But if Christianity will close itself in its cultural, ethnic, national traditions it risks to be left on the sidewalk of the road of history, to become a provincial minor phenomenon, the museum of ancient cultures. Old apostolate of converting should be replaced by apostolate of presence and witness. (See: W. Hryniewicz, *Chrzescijanstwo nadziei*, p. 62). Or Christianity will accept the challenge of the world that free itself from ethnic and national boundaries and will follow the commandment: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16, 15).

Ethnic Parish in Eschatological Perspective

God is the Lord of human history and the Lord of the Church. Even the most difficult epochs are in His hands. From God we received divine promises that can help us to see the future of our Church and of the world clearly and more optimistically.

At parting with disciples, Jesus said: "I am with you always even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28, 20). Our faith tells us, that the world will not exist forever. This world will face its end. We just do not know when it is going to happen. Being certain of the future of the Church, Christians do not have to be afraid to face the real image of the Church and its problems. Fear paralyzes. It is a bad adviser. Fear is an expression of weak and small faith, of the lack of trust to the power of truth. There is no need to defend the truth. It exists and defends itself by its own power. So there is no need for Christians to be afraid of losing the national traditions of their local churches.

It is also not true that ethnic character of the local churches is not important. But the Church has to stop to be enslaved by culture. Its cultural aspect is important and should be seen in much more wider perspective, like human culture in general. There is no way to separate matter, universe and life itself from what we understand as the human being. Everything plays its part in the mystery of salvation and eschatological transformation of humankind. In the biblical sense, creation is like the seed that produces a hundredfold and continues to produce. "My Father is working, and I too am working" (John 5, 17). The world was created incomplete, embryonic, in order to raise up the prophets and "workers for good" in cooperation of divine and human action until the day when the seed would be brought to its final maturity. This is why the initial commandment to cultivate the garden of Eden opens the immense perspectives of culture. Stemming from worship, cult culture with its all elements reconstitutes the "cosmic liturgy", a prelude already here on earth, to the heavenly doxology.

Christianity is changing constantly while the message of gospel remains eternal and always new. We have to rediscover its eschatological meaning and tell the world the news that the tomb is empty. Resurrected Jesus brings renewal and transformation into the world. He comes into the world as a doctor comes to somebody who is ill and needs medical treatment. Christ comes to heal. Salvation consists in the fact that God brings us back from the abyss of the fall of man. In the gospel, salvation actually means healing. "Your faith has made you well". Christ comes as the "great healer", and offers us the Eucharist as the "medicine of immortality" (See: P. Evdokimov, *In the world, of the Church: a Paul Evdokimov reader*, p. 204).

Instead of hiding in its ancient tradition, the Church needs to begin today a dialogue with the world. And this dialogue should be frank, open and honest. It is a truth that Christianity has its basic beliefs and rules. There is no need to resign from them for easy

accommodation to the needs of the minute or to the changing tastes of the world. Principal is not the value by itself. Its goal is to serve for something higher - for God and people. Christians' care for national or ethnic tradition of their communities should not overwhelm their responsibility for the salvation of man, for whom Jesus came to the world, suffered, died and was resurrected.

The Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner Czeslaw Milosh wrote: "The modern man has lost his belief in threatening and jealous God". Those words tell truth. After the Holocaust, the GULAG and other tragedies, the modern world survived brought to the end traditional political, cultural and religious myths. For many, the traditional images of God, almighty and eternally wise, were crushed by the facts of genocide, concentrate camps, world wars, epidemics and hunger. In some regions of the world religion became the instrument of war equal with a gun. As it was told in the report of *International council of Churches* about situation in Africa "some people kill with a Bible in a hand and others finish the work with finale *Amen*."

Modern man is looking for the religion of hope, trust and love. He is looking for religion, which is more than only fulfillment of religious restrictions and rites. He is looking for divine Comforter that will heal his injured soul and the wounds of the world. Nothing indicates that God and religion definitely disappear from the consciousness of modern people. Now they are more educated than in the past. So it should not be surprising that their requirements toward religion are higher. It is also the truth that the image of God they see in the Church very often is difficult to accept. This image is too universal to be recognized as "my God". Formulas and dogmas are not something that can give you religious experience. It is personal existential experience and only it talks to the man's heart when he is looking for meaning of life. Is it possible to live meaningful life without God? Is religion necessary for it? Nowadays religious people also ask themselves the questions. Many theologians and philosophers see in it a certain "religious renaissance" and awakening of the feeling of *sacrum*.