

THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF THE ROLE OF THE LAITY IN THE CHURCH

by

Daniel J. Sahas, Ph.D.
University of Waterloo
Ontario, Canada



**ORTHODOX
CHRISTIAN
LAITY**

Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL)
Occasional Papers Series, No.2, 1997

OCL ANNUAL MEETINGS

(Incorporated 1987)

1988 Chicago, Illinois
1989 Rye, New York
1990 Chicago, Illinois
1991 Baltimore, Maryland
1992 St. Louis, Missouri
1993 New York, New York
1994 Skokie, Illinois
1995 Baltimore, Maryland
1996 Sarasota, Florida
1997 Boston, Massachusetts

Dedication

A sincere appreciation is extended to the entire OCL Board of Directors and Advisors whose unconditional love and commitment for their Church in these past ten years exemplify the important historical role of the laity in the life of the Holy Orthodox Church.

OCL Occasional Papers Series
No. 1, 1997 Transition, Renewal:
One Faith, One Church

ALICE O. KOPAN, OCL Vice President
Production Coordinator

Copyright © 1997 by Orthodox Christian Laity

Our 10th Anniversary

Dear Orthodox Faithful,

*In celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the founding of Orthodox Christian Laity (1987-1997) it is a pleasure to publish our second occasional paper this year. Dr. Daniel Sahas' 1991 Keynote Address to OCL's Fourth Annual Meeting which took place in Baltimore, Maryland, **The Theological Foundation of the Role of the Laity in the Church** is an erudite essay which is as relevant today as it was when first presented and it continues to provide strength and challenges for the educational ministry of OCL. We believe it is appropriate to share it with a wider audience because it is a worthy blueprint for renewal and change within the Orthodox Christian Church in America at the beginning of the third millennium. Professor Sahas challenges clergy, laity and hierarchy to work together to more thoroughly answer questions raised by OCL so that we can move ahead in humility and excellence and with fairness and love.*

*If we as the communion of Orthodox Christian believers work together in synodical and consensus building ways so as to be of one heart, the spirit of the Truth who is present everywhere and who fulfills everything, will prevail in the Church. The Church will provide the balance and be the source of Light that the present day world seeks. **The Orthodox Christian Way is to work together in truth and love.***

Thank you to all the board members and advisors who have served OCL these past ten years with devotion, prayers and love. We all look forward to an exciting future of growth and involvement in the life of the Church.

*George E. Matsoukas
President, Orthodox Christian Laity
Fall, 1997*

The Theological Foundation of the Role of the Laity in The Church¹

What is The Royal Priesthood?

I want to express my sincere appreciation for providing me with the opportunity to participate in the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Orthodox Christian Laity, and for giving me the honor to address this gathering.

This has been a challenging and uplifting experience for me. I noted it as a threefold process of dialoguing with and sensitizing each other, reaching its climax by sharing in the divine liturgy this morning and partaking in the Eucharist -- the celebration of the *Pascha*, a new creation, and the act of renewal *par excellence* -- and now coming to its conclusion with a fellowship meal! I want to believe that the context and the order of things were not coincidental; definitely they are not at all irrelevant to the character of the *Orthodox Christian Laity* movement and unrelated to the theme of this year's conference, "*Kaine Ktisis*" (New Creation). Let me explain.

According to the opening words of the liturgy, it is the "Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" which is affirmed and which we enter every time the divine liturgy is celebrated. This way, we are reminded that we are not members of an organization or a corporation, but of a "royal priesthood and a holy nation" (1 Peter, 2:9). We are members of a theandric Body on account of our baptism in the name also "of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit"! It is, therefore, in the actualization of the Kingdom, from here and now, in a paschal meal and in the resurrection, that we share every time we partake in the divine liturgy. It is also interesting that in this

¹Address delivered on Sunday, October 27, 1991 at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Orthodox Christian Laity, Baltimore, MD (October 25-27, 1991).

eucharistic context, which is the apex of the affirmation of the Church, we are called to set aside "every worldly solicitude", every mundane concern and secular mentality, although not the world itself. We are called to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world (John 17: 9-26). It is from this Kingdom, then, reconstituted and renewed into a *kaine ktisis* and a new Adam, that we are called "to go out in peace" ("*en eirêne proêlthomen...*") into the world, the material and the human creation, renew and transfigure it with our lives. I find, therefore, an immense amount of meaning in what has happened in these last couple of days of this meeting, and in the order in which all this has happened, something which facilitates for me the entrance into a personal reflection on the theme "The theological foundation of the role of the laity in the Church".

What is Theology?

First of all, I think, we need to restate the words "theology" and "theological", deflate and demythologize them from their scholastic, perceived technical and professional meaning, and, recharged with their ecclesiological and sacramental experience, give them back their real focus. What we have been talking about and acting on these last couple of days is "Church", "participation", "liturgy", (a Greek word which literally means "work of, or for, the people", public function), "spirituality", "sustenance and maturation", "Theology and "Theological foundation", "administration and accountability", "faith, language and culture", "mission and outreach", "unity", "selection of hierarchs", "spiritual renewal", "women's role", "laity", "Orthodoxy" ... These must not be seen as concepts, abstractions and ideas isolated from each other, or agenda items of business of a corporate meeting. These are interwoven categories and integral Church experiences; they are Theology in action. Within the Church everything is and should be a theological experience: that is, an experience of the divine will and presence. Dealing with matters of life, faith and order of the Church is, and must be

every time, a function taking place under the light of eternity, *sub speciae aeternitatis*, beyond the temperament and the expediencies of a certain present. Otherwise the Church is not experienced as "the mystical Body of Christ", but as a corporation or some other secular organization. In that case we are not talking about organic and unalienable members of the Body of Christ, but about constitutional fellows of some sort of a religious club. There is here a radical and fundamental difference between *Sôma*, the *Corpus Christi*, and a *somateion*, or corporation -- no matter how pious or religious appears to be that corporation.

What is the Church?

We need also to delve into the reality of the Church, rethink our relationship with the Church, and purify our mind and life from possible contaminants of expediencies which we may have created in this relationship. In Christianity in general and in Orthodox Christianity in particular faith in the Church is not an option; it is an article of faith, along with our belief in One God, Father Almighty..., and in one Lord, Jesus, Christ..., and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life...". In the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of 325/381 which we recite in almost every Church service, and especially during the liturgy, we declare "And I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church". Interestingly enough, the place in the liturgy where the creed is recited is just before receiving communion. This is neither accidental nor without meaning: communion is meaningless without the reaffirmation that we are a Body, "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church", indispensable members, affirming, confirming and constituting each other. People are not in-dividuals(*a-tomon*) but persons, and especially in Church we are persons in the image destined to become like God by grace (*theosis*), rational sheep to be saved. Church and communion of persons, therefore, and in-dividualism, are contradictory terms. "Church" implies being in communion and Church functions are community functions,

"leitourgiai" and "services". We can not perceive communion as an isolated act and thus reduce it into a ritual, thus insulate it from the whole being and the life of the Church. We cannot partake in communion on the one hand and not have everything else in common on the other. We cannot be members of the one and the same Church, and not share in, be insulated, or truncated from the life of the Body as a whole. The very credal self-understanding of the Body as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic", affirms the essence, the constitutional character, the theandric and personal dimension of the Church, and defines our place and role in it. There is no distinction or mention of "clergy" and "laity" in this or in any other article of the Creed.

The Church is One

Firstly, the Church is "one" because God is One; and this is not a numerical, qualification, but a characterization of uniqueness and transcendence. Thus, there are no "churches" or compartments within the Church. Neither the clergy, nor the laity, not even God alone is the Church! So absolute is this "one". The Church is the Triune God *together* with His people, consisting of clergy and laity. The Church is neither a "theirs" nor an "ours". The Church is not an object which can be divided, compartmentalized, appropriated, or possessed, let alone exploited. Not even God Himself does appropriate the Church. Being Himself a Trinity of persons "in an eternal relationship of love", according to St. Maximus the Confessor, constitutes the Church as a communion of persons. Thus, any possessive pronoun, verbal or mental one, with reference to the Church, is irrelevant and, indeed, blasphemous. "Church" is a relational category which can be expressed only with the personal pronoun, and with the disposition of, "we", not of "I". Nor does the belief in "one" Church allow a division, verbal or mental one, between the visible, "administrative" institutional Church on the one hand, and the "spiritual", "theological" idea on the other, as we often hear in order to justify a separation,

division, classification, let alone alienation, of the clergy from the laity. The Church is always, simultaneously and in all places visible and invisible, material and spiritual, here and now, beyond and ever. The oneness of the Church is an ontological-Theological reality, not a legalist-constitutional category. The Church is a Body which is mystical, and a mystical reality which is a Body. Its concreteness is theandric, and its spirituality is existential, manifested in form, in real persons, in space and time. The Church is a unique phenomenon and a mystery which, by definition, is distinct from and exceeds any other model or corporation; and for this reason the Church is "one".

The Church is Holy

Secondly, the Church is "holy" because it is the Body of Christ; in fact the Church is not an "it" but "She", *e Ekklesia*, the Bride of Christ, the Son of the All-Holy One. Being one, the Church is holy as a whole. Neither the clergy, nor the laity is holier than the other. Holiness is an attribute which belongs to God shared with humans and with the creation by grace on account of God's creation and of His incarnation. Paul was addressing his letters "to the saints of such and such city ...", an expression which included *all* the members of a given local Church, not simply the titular ecclesiastics.

The Church is Catholic

Thirdly, the Church is "catholic", that is whole, encompassing and truthful, because God-the Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of truth, Who is everywhere and who fulfills everything". The adjective "catholic" has nothing to do with any quantitative, institutional, geographical, political, or ethnic universalism. The being and truth of the Church is something transhistorical which neither the clergy, nor the laity, can claim as their own achievement, nor any of them can serve as criterion of the Church's truth and authority. The catholicity of the truth of the Church lies in the consensus and in the sense of one accord (of being of one heart), and it is

the outcome of the *synergeia* of the human with the divine.

The Church is Apostolic

Fourthly, the Church is "apostolic" because the Church as a living reality lives and breathes the tradition and the ethos of the Apostles, the first Christians or "imitators of Christ"! According to the earliest Church tradition and the Biblical evidence, the life, the authority, the order and the essential ethos of the apostolic Church was eucharistic, communal, loving, joyous, spontaneous, active, responsive; wrought in consensus, driven by the sense of newness, and guided by that which seemed good to humans -- "to us" -- and to the Holy Spirit! (Cf. Acts 15:28). In one word, the apostolic Church was by conviction syn-odical, rather than conciliar; that is to say, witnessing to a living Body, with all the members "walking together" with the risen Christ, rather than being directed by some kind of executive fiat.

What is the Body of Christ?

Surely, the Body of Christ is not an abstraction, as it is neither an amorphous mass of faithful, or a monolithic uniform structure. The Body of Christ, headed by God-the-Holy Spirit, is an organic and living communion of persons in a state of an indispensable relationship, interdependence, service (*liturgiae*) and love. This is a redemptive, not corporate, relationship among the members of the Church and with God. It is in this sense, indeed, that according to Irenaeus of Lyon *extra ecclesia nulla salus* ("there is no salvation outside the Church"). We sin alone, but we are saved in the Church. The incorporation of a person into the Body of Christ through baptism -- the basis and presupposition of all sacraments -- is a unique, transhistorical, transcultural transformation and sealing, in itself an affirmation of such a relationship and the entrance into the communion of the people of God. Baptism is an *ordo*, and the first *ordo* at that. Before and, in fact, as a prerequisite of any other "ordination", a person must be ordained as *laikos*. That is why only baptized

members can ordain and be ordained to the priesthood. Baptism, as well as ordination to any rank of the priesthood, requires a community. Not only that, but baptism and ordination are two acts which are (as all acts of the Church used to be and ought to be) attached to the eucharist,² something which points to the eternal, mystical and priestly status of both of these "ordinations" and to the eucharistic character of order and authority in the Orthodox Church. These are simple truths and premises of Orthodox Ecclesiology and Theology.

Unfortunately, driven by a secular minded haste, and insecurity, we have trivialized, distorted and bypassed the fundamental significance of baptism; thus allowing an adulteration of Orthodox ecclesiology and praxis, caricaturing the *Church* as concept and reality with as a class of middle, or old-aged, male, bearded "professionals" in black cassocks; and this is said with no disrespect for our clerics and their unique and special "lot" (*clêros*) in the Church. The simple fact remains that *Church* is also the three-week old infant and the sixty year old convert, man or woman, who has been baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen", and who has entered the eschatological Kingdom, from here and now. It is as *laicos* that a person enters this Kingdom. Let us not confuse "nature" and "function", or "being", and "*leitourgema*", by replacing the former with the latter or, even worse, by subordinating the former to the latter. This is an ecclesiological and anthropological aberration; indeed, an expediency, or, worse, a convenient preference (*haeresis*) that is, a heresy.

The praxis of the Orthodox Church has shown a persistent resistance towards such a heresy, and an attested affirmation of the Orthodox ethos.

²Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 137-8.

A recent study by John P. Thomas, *Private Religious Foundations in the Byzantine Empire*³, albeit on another topic is, essentially, nothing else but the record of lay initiatives on all aspects of life -- religious, social, spiritual, political, artistic, scientific. What is more striking is the fact that such initiatives were the norm in a society which most of us may perceive as highly structured, clerical, hierarchical, strict, and monolithic. Given the cultural and ideological orientations of the times, one must feel amazed at the degree of individual creativity and freedom of expression cultivated and enjoyed during the pre-Ottoman Byzantium. The fact also that monasticism (this non-conventional habit and essentially a lay movement) flourished during the Byzantine period, while it is undernourished and even suppressed today as an authentic and indispensable ecclesiastical expression, points starkly to the contrast between the spirit of Byzantine society then and the climate of our North American ecclesiastical life today.

A New Creation and Renewal

The words and the concept *Kaine ktisis* ("a new creation") do not imply some "other" creation; they mean *this* creation -- you and me, renewed. They mean a renewed way of thinking; rejection of and redemption from what is fallen and old, freedom from the bonds of fear. This same notion interpreted otherwise and transposed within the North American context can be safely translated this way: that the Greeks have flourished in America not because they were different, but because the same Greeks were given a new and renewed context to express themselves. They were given in this society the opportunity to become integral partners, and were trusted (even by foreigners) to be so!... The notions "*kaine ktisis*" and "North America" can be seen in some parabolic sense as integral ones.

³Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1987.

North America is a New World, a new people, a new society, a new ideology; a new "experiment" if you wish. I believe that there is something congenial (albeit distinct with regard to the essence) between Orthodoxy and this North American spirit. From this point of view, Orthodoxy is, indeed, the best kept secret in America. This "secret" is something which we Orthodox first need to discover, to study, to analyze, to cultivate, to live and make it a reality, as a blessing, as a talent and as a lot (*cleros*) given to *us* by God. We will, certainly, be called to give word as to whether we noticed this blessing and we used, or alas buried, the talent.

Today, in this very land, we are witnessing to a resurgence of a man-made, self-serving, idiosyncratic "ecclesiology" which rationalizes, separates, and compartmentalizes the Church into visible and invisible and, with regard to the visible, into clergy and laity, and within the clergy into higher and lower, and within the laity into elite and common -- and all these, and their unlimited subdivisions, with no ecclesiological criteria whatsoever! Such an ecclesiology has no historical and realistic, let alone Theological, Christological, Pneumatological, Ecclesiological and Soteriological substance. It is an "ecclesiology" fostered by memories of selective circumstances of history in which political and physical captivity prevailed temporarily over the freedom, "personhood", and the risen character of the transhistorical Church. It is an ecclesiology in which power, influence, authority, primacy, law and order (Roman preoccupations and structures), narrowly perceived and even more narrowly legislated, prevail over grace; an ecclesiology in which grace is subordinated to and administered by a temporal authority.

The Wholeness of the Church

This is an ecclesiology which Orthodox Christianity resisted from day one, and against which it acted in such a determined, unambiguous and definitive way some ten

centuries ago, that brought about a split which distinguished Christendom into two definite jurisdictions. The schism of 1054 has all the trappings of cultural, political, ecclesiastical diversities between East and West, Rome and Constantinople, or personality conflicts; trappings which scholars delight themselves by analyzing and debating them factually and hypothetically, or writing books and reading papers about it. But, at the very bottom of things, the schism of 1054 was a *theological* statement of Orthodox Christianity on a threefold question, "What is the Church? Who is the Church? Where is the Church?" To this threefold question the Church of the East, which claims to be "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church", the Church to which we proudly belong and continue to witness, responded clearly; the Church is the mystical Body of Christ headed by God-the Holy Spirit; the Church is not an empty shell or tent but "a royal priesthood and a holy nation", "the tabernacle of God with His people" (Rev. 21:3); and, thirdly, the catholic Church (in the early Christian meaning of catholicity) is where the people of God are, in space and time, organically related to the Church of the past and to the Church to come. Ecclesiological aberrations were not good enough then; they are good enough today. As in all instances of history, it has been the Orthodox sense of the *pleroma* (the wholeness) of the Church that has detected "preferences" (that is, "heresies") and idiosyncrasies, has demanded and brought about rectification; thence, the immense role of all members of the Church, clergy and laity.

What is the Role of the Laity in the Church?

Allow me to name four more practical ways of defining this role, especially that of the laity:

1. To become sensitive to the theandric character of the Church and make Theology an integral part of education, in the informal and formal sense of the word. Why only business, sports, economics, professions, politics, social issues, travel, fiction, music, arts..., and not

Theology, Church History, Patristic literature and thought, Liturgics, Spirituality, Canons, Church arts as part of our formal and informal curriculum in life? We Greek Orthodox have been moving around the world carrying our souvlakia, our kitchen recipes and our handwoven crafts; and we should be proud of these. But we have not been good enough at moving around carrying...books! Nothing breeds superstition and darkness faster than ignorance; and nothing weakens the fabric of the Church faster and renders the Church into a monolithic strait-jacket than theological illiteracy, impersonal spirituality and intellectual dependency.

2. Active participation in the life of the Church, on the local community-parish level, and on the national level. Orthodoxy is not a forum of religious individualism, nor of spiritual provincialism, and "Church" is not equivalent either to theocracy, or to autocracy, or to dictatorship, let alone to ethnarchy. The Church is not even a democracy (all these are mundane and secular categories), but something above and beyond that. The Church is singly a Body, and a communion of saints. If democracy is measured by the degree and quality of participation of its citizens, infinitely more so does this principle apply in measuring the vitality of the Church. There is no such thing as "representational" Church, or Orthodoxy by proxy, or Orthodoxy by remote control (signing that is, and mailing a donation), or "membership in good standing" by having paid an annual due; nor are there "Greek-Orthodox *Tagmata* (Orders)" comprised of an economic elite as is the case north of the United States. These are ecclesiological caricatures, cartoons which we have come to accept as normative images, and with which we have been feeding ourselves and lulling our children for too long. Such a "good standing" is tantamount to staggering; it has no standing at all in the Orthodox Church.

3. Awareness of, discipleship, contact, relations and communion with the Church at large, meaning all Orthodox jurisdictions. In fact,

there are no such expressions as "other jurisdictions" and "Church at large" for the Orthodox Church. Provincialism, phyletism, or tribalism are not characteristics of the Church born on the day of the Pentecost.

4. Striving after excellence and demanding the same from others -- with firmness and love; neither with firmness without love (that would tantamount to self-righteousness), nor with love without firmness; that would tantamount to naiveté and complacency. The distinctiveness between "Law" of the past and the "New Covenant" is summarized in the verb "exceeds" in the sermon on the Mount: "Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

Such, it seems to me, is the awesome role of all the members of the Church; clergy and laity alike. It is a prophetic role; a role of the uncomfortable rather than of the comfortable pew. It is a role of firmness and love at once. This is how the Church has been renewed in the past and how the *kaine ktisis* is experienced always. *The Orthodox Christian Laity* (OCL) has raised acute, fundamental (albeit not always in the most thorough way) and uncomfortable ecclesiological questions, as this has been squarely affirmed by the unfortunate way in which the movement has been received by the ecclesiastical-administrative hierarchy. No one should feel proud and rejoice at the latter, but no one should wither and refrain from doing the former, either. In some quarters of the clergy and the laity these have been unsettling questions; but they are important and they needed to be asked. Those who feel threatened by such questions should seek to reaffirm and reinstate first their own faith in the Church as a human as well as a divine institution, "against which the powers of death shall not prevail" (Matt. 16:18). As to those who raise the questions and demand responses, they should be humble; act as the yeast; be

driven by the spirit of *kenosis*; look for inspiration in the very event of the Incarnation and the reality of the cross and resurrection, thus becoming true "Christians" that is "imitators of Christ"; and seek to raise questions which are of truth and of life; this is what makes the "new creation" be always new.

About the Author:

DANIEL J. SAHAS, Honors B.A. in Theology, University of Athens, S.T.M. Sociology of Religion (Indianapolis, IN), Ph.D. History of Religions (Hartford, CT). Professor of History of Religions and former Director of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He is the author of *John of Damascus on Islam, the Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (1972); *Catechesis: The Maturation of the Body* (1984); *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm*, (1986, 1988²); *Monotheism in Essence and Manifestation: Judaism-Christianity-Islam*, (1994, 1995²); *Allusions to Orthodoxy*, (1994), in Greek; *Orthodoxy in Life*, (1995), in Greek; *For the Moments of Bereavement*, (1996), in Greek; *This is a great mystery: The Sacrament of Marriage in the Orthodox Church*; and of a series of studies in the history of Byzantine-Muslim relations, and in the history, theology and spirituality of Byzantium and of Eastern Orthodoxy.

He has served the Greek Orthodox Church as member of the board of trustees of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, vice-president of the Diocesan Council of the Diocese of Toronto (Canada), ecumenical officer of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Canada in the Canadian Council of Churches, and President of the Greek Orthodox Community of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

Yes

*I am concerned about my Church
and I subscribe to the missions and goals of Orthodox
Christian Laity. Please enroll me as a member and
accept my support.*

Name

Address

City

State

Zip

Telephone

Church Name

Orthodox Jurisdiction(check one): ☐ Albanian ☐ Antiochian

☐ Bulgarian ☐ Greek ☐ OCA ☐ Romanian

☐ Russian ☐ Serbian ☐ Other _____

☐ Individual ☐ Family ☐ Renewal ☐ New Member

☐ Guardian: \$1,000 and Over \$ _____

☐ Benefactor: \$500 - \$999 \$ _____

☐ Patron: \$250 - \$499 \$ _____

☐ Donor: \$100 - \$249 \$ _____

☐ Sponsor: \$26 - \$99 \$ _____

☐ Member: \$25 \$ _____

NON-MEMBER STATUS

☐ OCL Publications Subscriber \$25 \$ _____

☐ Anonymous Contribution \$ _____

Please also send me _____ copies of
Project For Orthodox Renewal. I have enclosed a
check or money order for \$12.95 per copy plus \$3.00
Shipping and Handling per order.

Forward remittance to:

ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN LAITY
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 4020
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2507

Contributions are tax deductible as allowed by law.

COMPLIMENTS OF OCL

**For more information about
Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL), contact**

**Orthodox Christian Laity
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 4020
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2507
Fax: 312-332-4905
Web Site: <http://www.ocl.com>**