

God's erotic love for the Church: Christos Yannaras' ecclesial vision

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Throughout *Elements of Faith*, Christos Yannaras employs insistently expressions that qualify the Church as having a specific mode of existence that sets it apart from all others. Thus, we find references to "ecclesial anthropology," "ecclesial language," "ecclesial hermeneutics," etc., where we would normally expect – at least in the academy – other kinds or adjectival qualifications such as "theological" or, perhaps, "philosophical." Yannaras' particular way of dealing with the Church in his writings will be important in bringing to light the erotic love that God has for the Church, the subject of this essay. But equally important is the way it resonates with Paul's teaching in his letter to the Ephesians, revealing the (self-) understanding of the early Church: God the Father raised His Christ from the dead; He placed Him at His right hand, put "all things under His feet and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22)." We shall see that Yannaras' vision places the Church into the ontological order as an instance of freedom for persons in communion that transcends the system

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of nature without abolishing it. Such freedom in communion becomes the living measure for all spheres of human action and the created order.

Not only does the Church conceive herself as intimately united with Christ, her head, for whom she is the body, but also as especially glorious among all things created, for she has the fullness of divine life poured into her by her divine Lord. Or, to change the image, to see the Church as continually invited into existence in order to become a loving partner, a bride, to the Christ whose body she is. Indeed, from an ecclesial point of view, the erotic imagery that has resonated in Israel's account of the Lord's love for her, in spite of her constant infidelity and, most vividly celebrated in the Song of Songs, stands in anticipation of the messianic banquet to be celebrated between Christ and His Church, His Bride. But it also seems to us that story of this erotic love cannot be told without introducing the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary, through whom the uncreated Word became, by the Holy Spirit, flesh: as Christ is formed as human being in His Mother's womb, Christians con-form to Christ; they are reborn, in the womb of the Church. Thus, the notion of the Church's unique reality and the persistent invitation that God makes to humanity through her resonate in the unique and gracious relationship between the Mother of God and the Incarnate Word. For Yannaras, such resonance, in the form of the *Theotokos*, reverberates in the historical Church's embodying of the divine eros.

To Be the Church

"No spiritual gift derives from natural or ethical qualities of man, but comes always from 'above' or outside nature or history. / . . . / The body of Christ is . . . built up through a convergence of events and not through a preservation or transmission of historical realities."¹

For Yannaras, as it is for John Zizioulas, the ability to express oneself "ecclesially" is "to realise life and the expression of life as an event of communion."² That he often states this in the context of his critique of the West for de-emphasising the truth of the person, for falling into anthropocentric subjectivism, and for transmuting the experience of the triadic God into a "religion," is important and deserves attention. However, they are not central to the subject of this essay. Rather we shall emphasize the ecclesial as a certain mode of existing,

¹ John Zizioulas, "The Church as the 'Mystical' Body of Christ," in *Communion and Otherness* edited by Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 295.

² Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 58.

thinking and saying, one conceived on the basis of a communion constituted by events that manifest the divine eros.

A path into an appreciation of God's erotic love for the Church may be found in the expression, "ecclesial fact," that Yannaras used in his recent *Relational Ontology*.³ Given the mode of exposition that manifestly emulates the *more geometrico* of the early Wittgenstein, we take the liberty of understanding "fact" as Wittgenstein did in the beginning of the *Tractatus*, proposition 2: "What is the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs." The essence of Wittgenstein's meaning is that what we see as we perceive the world is not the world's substance but the facts that constitute it.⁴ In Yannaras' Orthodox ecclesial notion of "fact" that underlies his thinking, the word "relation" may be considered as constituting "an ontological fact – that is a mode of existence or even a *foundational* fact of existence."⁵ In regard specifically to the Church, the "fact," or "state of affairs" that she is, can be appreciated by distinguishing two areas in which relationship becomes definitive of her reality.

The first has to do with the qualitative character of "ecclesial language" that Yannaras distinguishes from the more reductive, i.e., naturalizing, and quantifying language of science. The issue becomes especially dramatic when it concerns the nature of human being: the choice of languages and the subsequent methodologies employed in the description of man become clearly decisive. Yannaras' conviction is that an ecclesial language "able to articulate experiences of qualitative differentiation, experiences or relationship, and sensitivities which reveal a knowledge which the senses do not assure."⁶ In the context of justifying his choice of language, Yannaras touches on the second area of relationship that we shall turn to below, namely, the language of worship and the experience of communion in the body of the Church. For the time being, however, it is the bond between ecclesial language and the relational and personal nature of ecclesial anthropology that holds our attention.

Contrasting with the biological view of the human body as object of study, the orthodox ecclesial interpretation of the entirety of human being, body and

³ Christos Yannaras, *Relational Ontology* translated by Norman Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), p. 83.

⁴ This is not the place to belabour Yannaras' drawing upon Wittgenstein and Heidegger in his philosophical endeavours that ultimately argue for an Orthodox worldview. His use of both is selective, but, especially in relation to Heidegger, he manages to bring to bear the force of Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy (after Plato) and its underlying onto-theology, i.e., its nihilism. Cf. *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* translated by Haralambos Ventis (London: T&T Clark, 2005.)

⁵ Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, p. 1.

⁶ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 60.

soul, sees it as constituted by energies through which personal identity, i.e., hypostasis, is effectuated and disclosed precisely as personal. Otherwise said, an ecclesial perspective understands the manifestation of the human body and the human soul as “dynamically effected events.” A fuller intelligibility of man emerges once it is seen that these constitutive events reflect not only of the divine image that sustains them, but especially “the erotic singularity” with which God loves him. In sum, human existence is personal existence that implies freedom to engage or not with the “call of God guiding /a man's/ existence either to life, which is the relationship with, or to death, which is the separation from, God.”⁷ Of import for ecclesial interpretation of human being is, thus, the erotic love of God for the human person. Because the very sustenance of a man's personal existence, of his hypostasis, cannot be assured on the basis of human nature on its own, it is the relationship secured in God's desire to save and bring man into an eternal life that overcomes the inevitable breakdown of the physical body. God's uncreated personal existence, made up of a Trinity of divine hypostases, is always already marked by a relational love within His nature that is beyond necessity. Yet man's created nature is invited through the historical Incarnation of the eternally begotten Word to participate in God's triune life and achieve a deified mode of existence beyond death and corruption, beyond the necessity imposed on man by his physical nature: “/.../ man can realize his existence as eternity and incorruptibility, just as the divine life of triadic co-inherence and communion is eternal and incorruptible.”⁸

The potential of human nature in view of personhood is to be brought to fulfillment in the hypostatic union with God who willed to be like man so that man might enjoy His divinity as part of the Body of His Christ, i.e., in communion with others who are “singularly” loved. It is, thus, that the Church, brought into reality by the Holy Spirit, is part and parcel of God's “passionate love” and invitation to renew the life of humankind. Constituted and revealed in the Eucharistic meal, the Church relives an event by which the created becomes united with the uncreated: “In the ‘flesh’ of Christ and ‘in His blood’ the dividing wall of hostility’ between the created and the uncreated is abolished. Now the created can exist in the manner of the uncreated, the way of ‘true life’.”⁹ The emphasis that Yannaras places on the ecclesial experience through which the triadic God is known and continues to be lived as a redemptive presence for humankind and for creation as well, for which man is called to be priest. The Church, brought into reality by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is a manifestation God's “passionate

⁷ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 64.

⁸ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 59.

⁹ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 123.

love" and invitation to renew the life of humankind and refashion nature within the economy of transforming grace. A liturgy of life and expression of divinely inspired self-giving, the Church's Eucharist effectuates a hypostatic union of her own, transforming the material species taken from created nature into the body and blood of God the Son.¹⁰

Significantly, such a unity realized in the Eucharist and constitutive of the Church mirrors the event of the Incarnation itself, namely, the Holy Spirit's coming upon the Virgin Mary, His created vessel. Through her, it becomes possible that created life can share the life that is uncreated. Indeed, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Jewish flesh of the Virgin in order that the Incarnation of Christ occurred has its parallel on the day of the Pentecost in which the Church understands herself as belonging to God in erotic communion.

The Church as an "Erotic Affair"

"To those listening properly to the divine things the name 'love' (agape) is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term "yearning" (*eros*). ... /Yearning/ moves the superior to provide for the subordinate, and it stirs the subordinate in a return toward the superior."¹¹

At the very end of his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein consoles his readers with the assurance that, to the degree that they have understood what he has tried to tell them in such arduous manner, they will begin to see the world aright. For Yannaras, seeing the world and all else aright hangs on seeing them ecclesially. This would imply an arduousness of its own, namely, an apophatic approach to knowing God as a person, a hypostasis. The truth that the Church bears for the sake of humankind involves more than notional knowledge. It is a real knowledge won in dynamic relation with the living God that matters and this entails, on the part of the Church, a resistance to the temptation to wish to exhaust what she knows about God in conceptual formulations, potentially idols of sorts. The result, pervasive throughout Western Christianity, has been – Yannaras argues – a precedence given to individual morality in regard to the ecclesial fact and to the centrality of the liturgy. The mode of the Church's existence as communion and participation in divine life as vital for humankind's

¹⁰ Christos Yannaras, "The Kingly, Prophetic, and Priestly Ethos of the Eucharist," *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 99-100.

¹¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 709D, p. 81.

salvation has been largely forgotten. What the Church holds as true is “the truth of life which defeats corruption and death and realises the image of God in the human being.”¹² Attention has to be drawn newly to what makes the Good News “good.” In responding to this, Yannaras proposes that, “The unique identity of Christian revelation /.../ is the experience of God as the ‘mad lover’ of the whole creation and each human person. /.../ God as Person in a ‘transport of erotic goodness’ is the ‘good news’, the gospel, of the Church, the message of its experience.”¹³ God’s erotic, or ecstatic, desire longs to draw human beings into loving communion with Him, moreover, a love freely given and freely received in a mutual “erotic self-transcendence.”¹⁴

According to Dionysius, whose thinking Yannaras follows closely in this matter, the ecstasy that the experience of self-transcendence implies a yearning, for which the word “*eros*” resonates as more appropriate than “*agape*.” “Indeed some of our writers on sacred matters have thought the title ‘yearning’ (*eros*) to be more divine than ‘love’ (*apape*). The divine Ignatius writes: ‘He for whom I yearn /or My *eros*/ has been crucified.’”¹⁵ Expressed still otherwise, the unknowable nature of God’s essence is, for the good of humankind, compensated by the revelation of Him as a personal energy with a longing for His human creatures. Not to be confounded with “carnal *eros*” which tends toward individual assertion of self-sufficiency, *eros* rightly conceived underscores the primacy of the “loving mutual co-inherence” that constitutes the divine Trinity and the model for reciprocal erotic self-giving amongst human persons.

The erotic movement of God toward human being, most eminently demonstrated in the Incarnation, corresponds to Dionysius’ outlining of God’s *exitus* and then *reditus*, namely, from superior to subordinate and return. In the economy of this movement, God’s uncreated yearning to provide for and restore humankind and the divine image, with which it was created, stirs up a responsive yearning toward the uncreated source of all goodness and grace. In the ecclesial fact thus configured around the gift of divine love and Eucharistic gratitude, men and women are deified through the divine energies that are found in the sacramental life of the Church; they are led to attain a mode of godly existence in the interstices of the uncreated and the created. God’s erotic love for the Church is, in essence, procreative of Christ-like human beings, of

¹² Yannaras, “Pietism, as an Ecclesiological Heresy,” in *Freedom for Morality* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1976), p. 125.

¹³ Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, pp. 105-06.

¹⁴ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 95.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, “*The Divine Names*”, 709B, p. 81. Cf. Yannaras’ working on this particular theme in *Apophatic Knowledge as Communion*, pp. 99-101.

whom the Blessed Virgin Mary is the foremost example in two decisive ways: as the one whose natural energy most identified with that of the uncreated; and as the one through whom the Church understands herself likewise as Mother to the saints.

The Church as Matrix and Womb: the Birthing of the Saints

"The Virgin Church continually gives birth to Christ by her pure teaching, the gospel proclaimed according to scripture, so that the Word is made flesh in her children."¹⁶

In his second sermon, "On the Entry into the Holy of Holies," St. Gregory Palamas offers a striking image of the kind of intimacy that exists between her and her divine Son. In the Virgin's conception of the Son of God by the Holy Spirit, "There was nothing between the One overshadowing and the one overshadowed, not air, either earthly or heavenly, nor anything perceptible or beyond our perception."¹⁷ The envisaging that nothing is between the Holy Spirit's actions and her yielding of her biological body underlines the immediacy and the intimacy of the Virgin's relationship with the divine source of all Life. It also is strongly suggestive an erotic communion, again a co-inherence of the life of the uncreated and that of the created. But the significance of the miracle does not rest merely on the Virgin providing a biological means for the Incarnate Word. As Yannaras remarks, ".../ she builds up his existence with her flesh and her blood just as she forms the 'soul' of her child with her nursing, speech, caressing, affection."¹⁸

In the light of the birthing and nurturing role of the Virgin vis-à-vis the Incarnate Word, the Church's reality also comes into focus. Bringing forth the principle points made in the first sections of the essay, we might see that the events that converge to build up the Church as the Body of Christ have as their transcendental condition the Incarnate Word's conception by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Stated otherwise and to paraphrase St. Irenaeus' celebrated teaching, the erotic love that God has for the Church and for the salvation of humankind has its necessary condition the Incarnation by which

¹⁶ John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), p. 138.

¹⁷ St. Gregory Palamas, "On the Entry into the Holy of Holies II," in *Mary the Mother of God: Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas* (South Canaan, Pa.: Mount Tabor Publishing, 2005), pp. 42-43.

¹⁸ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, pp. 99-100.

the uncreated allows Himself to exist in the mode of the created so that created persons might (*capax Dei*) may exist in the mode of the uncreated.

In consequence to God's erotic yearning to deliver His human creation from death and corruption and to introduce it into His divine life, He frees it from natural necessity and introduces it into an ecclesial existence, a new ontological fact. The Church's mode of existence is to become itself a matrix and womb in the wake of the Pentecost. Through her, the Holy Spirit brings into being a new family, all the members of which are reborn in her to be deified in Christ. It is thereby that she too merits the name of Mother, incarnating the Word communicated in her sacraments and in her teachings to those who come to her to be restored and finally glorified.

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