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**Baptismal and Ethno-cultural Community:
A Case Study of Greek Orthodoxy**

Summary

Christianity has appeared in history not as a new religion but merely as a new sort of Eucharistic and eschatological community. This community, which was not characterized on the basis of racial, ethnic, social or political criteria, has always considered Baptism to be the sacrament of initiation through which one might enter the Christian community, the sacrament which offered spiritual birth or re-birth to the faithful. If the Baptism integrates us within the church, then by necessity the entrance to the church also involves entrance to the Eucharist, and consequently the participation to the Eucharist which is viewed as the Baptism's fulfillment, to the extent that Eucharist is considered as the sacrament *par excellence* of the church. Through the Baptism and the Chrismation we thus enter, and through the Eucharist we fulfill the ecclesiological hypostasis and existence, the new life in Christ in which all previous forms of being are overcome or even left behind, all kinds of worldly bounds (both biological, but also cultural/spiritual) are relativized.

Due to the almost universal application of the infant baptism practice and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman/Byzantine Empire (380), many things were changed regarding not only the understanding and interpretation of baptism, as well as the sacramental liturgical *praxis* and the overall Christian life, but also church's formation itself. The most important consequence of this universal application of the infant baptism practice and of the official recognition of Christianity as the Empire's religion was the gradual transformation of the church from a baptismal community into an ethno-cultural community with pre-defined "rules of entrance". As far as the Greek case is concerned we should take into consideration the disastrous consequences deriving from the persistent denial, on the part of certain conservative and fundamentalist circles to the use by the Greek Orthodox Church of liturgical translations. Such translations would facilitate the congregation's active participation in the liturgy, especially in the sacraments and the Eucharist. Certainly, Baptism is not an exception. This means that because the faithful are not fully aware of the profound theological meaning of the blessings, they usually attend a secularized ceremony, and in some sense a form of a magical ceremony, whose highest point would be the name giving instance. In this perspective the whole theological meaning and nature of Baptism remains an issue limited exclusively to theologians or liturgical scholars.

What lies beneath the problems raised above is in fact the oblivion of the eschatological consciousness and vision of the church, the loss of the dialectical tension between eschatology and history, the church and the world, the desert and the empire, in other words, what happened over time is a gradual slide from the realm of the ecclesiological hypostasis to the ethno-cultural one, from the ecclesial to the imperial and secular belonging. The first step toward this slide can be traced back to the secularized political eschatology of Byzantium, and its claim for the incarnation of the kingdom of God on earth. Another integral part of this process is also the politico-religious model of “symphonia,” this byzantine political ideal, which was partly adopted later by the Balkan national states. However, the culmination point of this long process of the ecclesial identity’s recession, obtained through Baptism and Eucharist, for the sake of the ethno-cultural one, granted by natural birth and participation in an ethnic community, has to be related to the 19th century emergence of the principle of nationalities, and the consequent phenomenon of “national Orthodoxy,” i.e., the understanding of the church in national terms. This capitulation, of the church with the empire and later with the national state, and the identification of the faith community with the wider society, had many other serious effects, namely the addiction to spiritual self-sufficiency and the *ex officio* way of thinking under the influence of stereotypes of race and nation, the praise of our ancestors and the homeland, and the neglect of the element of innovation and personal choice that Christianity brought at its beginning.

Today, 190 years after the Greek Revolution of 1821, the church in Greece seems unable to be absolved from the identification syndrome with the nation; it seems unable to separate its work, its teaching, preaching and its mission in general from the course of the nation and realize that the boundaries of baptism, the boundaries of church are no longer identified with the national boundaries. Thus, whenever the Greek state heads toward a policy which will adapt to the new international reality and moves in a direction that could lead to its formal separation from the church, the latter protests by pointing to the past as well as to the significant contribution it had to the “struggles of the nation.” This way it manages to sustain its co-dependence and absolute relationship to it.

Finally, Orthodoxy seems to debilitate its theological and spiritual resources of the patristic and Eucharistic tradition in an “identities” rhetoric and in an outdated religious tribalism which comes at a stark contrast to Gospel’s call for supraracial, even supranational, identities and communities. Thus, Orthodoxy is confined in traditionalism, fundamentalism, social anachronism or even reactionism. It is trapped in pre-modernity statuses adopting the authoritarian structures of patriarchal society