

Pavel Florenskij's *The Concept of the Church in Sacred Scripture*: The Reaction and Response of a Systematic Theologian

In a chapter on Eastern Orthodox theology in the book *The Modern Theologians*, and before being propelled to Cantuarian fame, Rowan Williams describes Pavel Florenskij as “a brilliant and eccentric polymath who finally disappeared in the Gulag.”¹ Several learned colleagues from this Faculty and from a wide spectrum of other Faculties in this *alma mater* have already demonstrated the eclectic interests and expertise of this great Russian. It is therefore unnecessary to contextualize the author and his multifaceted talents. One is therefore called to delve immediately into the reaction and the response to Florenskij's *The Concept of the Church in Sacred Scripture* from the point of view of systematic theology.

Florenskij insists that the only legitimate way to know the dogmas is the lived religious experience. Logical-abstract knowledge, on its own, perceives a phenomenic reality full of antinomies which, when facing reason, lead the latter to doubt and scepticism. The only way forward consists in passing from concepts to spiritual experience whose organ is the ‘heart,’ according to the biblical sense of the concept, namely, the heart as the seat of human decisions.

Truth is found *in* the Trinity. Spiritual knowledge on the part of the believer consists in the interior union between the know-*er* and the known. This knowledge is possible only by living “ecclesiality,” which Florenskij defines as the safe harbour where the anxiety of the heart finds rest. Ecclesiality is not derived

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¹ Rowan Williams, “Eastern Orthodox Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford and Cambridge/Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), 2:157.

from abstraction or ratiocination, but from life itself, because ecclesiality is a new life, life in the Spirit. Where spiritual life is absent, it is necessary to have something exterior to guarantee ecclesiality: the hierarchy in Catholicism, and the confessional and scriptural formulas in Protestantism. Florenskij affirms that in Orthodoxy *the concept* of ecclesiality does not exist, but *it is ecclesiality itself* that exists.²

This succinct presentation seeks to merge together an overview, or a bird's eye-view, of the long text by Florenskij and my personal reaction to it, as I see – or rather hear – aspects of it echo in contemporary Catholic theology. Herein lies the contribution offered by this short paper.

The text by Florenskij, *The Concept of Church in Sacred Scripture*, is extremely rich, abounding in a return to the biblical founts and other sources of the Tradition of the Church, in particular the Church Fathers and a varied selection of authors from the Russian Orthodox spiritual corpus. The convergence and confluence of these three streams provides us with the extremely fertile soils of Florenskij's text.

In the “Methodological Observations” of Chapter 1, he explains how the Church is not solely a human reality.³ What is finite and provisional is to be incorporated with what is infinite and eternal.⁴ Florenskij highlights the mysteric and eschatological light which enables us to delve deeply into the Church. In order to pass on to others eternal life, she has to possess eternal life. Florenskij states that “the Church is the road to the ascent into heaven. The Church is Jacob's ladder and from the visible she raises to the invisible.”⁵ He insists on the insufficiency of words to describe the mystery of the Church.⁶

When he discusses “The Double Nature of the Church” in Chapter 2, he talks of the *encounter* of the divine will and the human will, the Church's double nature, a bipolar unity, where – as I interpret him – eternity meets time, a concept which reminds me of the theological schema of the contemporary Italian eclectic theologian, Bruno Forte.⁷ The Church is more than a sum-total of the faithful. It is an expression of Christian life, as well as the ambit where Christian life is

² See Franco Arduoso et al., *La teologia contemporanea* (Torino: Marietti, 1980), 652; Battista Mondin, *Dizionario dei teologi* (Bologna: Studio Domenicano, 1992), 241.

³ See Pavel A. Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa nella Sacra Scrittura* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2008), 101.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 103.

⁵ See *ibid.*

⁶ See *ibid.*, 105-106.

⁷ See Bruno Forte, *L'eternità nel tempo. Saggio di antropologia ed etica sacramentale*, Simbolica Ecclesiale 6 (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni Paoline, 1993).

accomplished. So, besides divine and human, we also have the *eternal* Church and the *historic* Church, *stasis* (divine) and *kinesis* (human), the “new” and the “old,” authority and liberty, the dogmatic and the mystical.

In his “A Dogmatic-Metaphysical Definition of the Church” (Chapter 3), he focuses in an astonishing depth on the first chapter of St Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. Florenskij does this both exegetically as well as patristically.⁸ Regarding Ephesians 1:23b (“... the Church, which is his body [*soma*], the fullness [*pleroma*] of him who is filled, all in all”), he underlines the fact that this is not a metaphor, nor a simile, but an ontological formulation.⁹ The Church *is* the Body of Christ. This offers a reminder of a text of the Magisterium, published after Florenskij’s death, namely, the encyclical letter by Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943). The theme also enables scholars in recalling several contributions published in 1997, in the festschrift in honour of the renowned Jesuit ecclesiologist Angel Antón.¹⁰

The Church *is* the true Body of Christ, metaphysically, substantially, *not* metaphorically.¹¹ When Florenskij talks of the Church as “instrument of salvation,” one immediately recalls the similar and iconic words of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*: “Since the Church is in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity...”¹²

Abstract definitions are not enough, but recourse is to be made to experience, indeed the mystical experience.¹³ Florenskij’s in-depth analysis on verses from the Letter to the Ephesians, and consequently on *soma*, *pleroma* and etymological exegesis of related words, offers the reader more food for thought than the mouth can gobble. The footnotes (by Natalino Valentini and Lubomír Žák, the editors of the Italian edition used in this study), and the endnotes (by Florenskij himself), I have to say, are a treasure trove in themselves. These continue to shed light on the glimmering gold of the Florenskij *corpus* ... or should I say the Florenskij *forma mentis*? ... or the Florenskij *sapientia cordis*?

⁸ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 129.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰ See *Ecclesia Tertiū Millenniumi Advenientis. Omaggio al P. Angel Antón*, ed. Fernando Chica, Sandro Panizzolo and Harald Wagner (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1997).

¹¹ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 137.

¹² Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London and Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:849.

¹³ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 143.

Chapter 4 traces the “Fundamental Characteristics of the Church.” Florenskij refers to Chomyakov’s rich and fertile intuitions on the Church. Insights such as ecclesial growth, integrity and internal unity, the members of the Church, the Church as a building and the bonds of unity are presented. I was particularly struck by aspects such as the welcoming of members who are transformed, ennobled, enlivened and elevated.¹⁴ The mention of the choir ready to sing at a feast¹⁵ is, in my opinion, an echo of Ignatius of Antioch’s *Letter to the Romans*. The first-century Apostolic Father affirms: “Grant me no more than that you let my blood be spilled in sacrifice to God, while yet there is an altar ready. You should form a choir of love and sing a song to the Father through Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ The concept of *communication* is underlined – the communication of gifts (as in John Chrysostom) and the gifts of the Spirit (as in Theodoret) – while then proceeding to see an analogy in the nervous system¹⁷ and the diffusion of love.¹⁸

Florenskij focuses on Christ as the Head, and on the significance of the Head to the Body.¹⁹ What I deem to be an excursus on the Gehenna²⁰ is indeed thought-provoking. Another aspect in Chapter 4 which is treated in great detail is the absolute integrity of the Church.²¹ He focuses on unity in Christ (recapitulation as in Ephesians 1:10), the unity between Christ the Head and his Body, the unity of the Church in all its manifestations and the unity in faith and knowledge.²² The Church is *one*. The Church is *unique*.²³ An important affirmation explained by Florenskij is that the ontological union of the believers asks for a unifying Principle which is not the work or result of human beings, but which is given to them by God.²⁴ I thoroughly enjoyed when Florenskij states that the unity of the Body of Christ and his sacramental life makes of them *one* substance (*homoousios*), not like substance.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 2,2, in *Epistles of St Clement of Rome and St Ignatius of Antioch*, Ancient Christian Writers, ed. J. Quasten and J.C. Plumpe (Westminster/Maryland and London, 1946), 1:81.

¹⁷ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 176.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 179.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 180.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 182-187.

²¹ See *ibid.*, 187.

²² See *ibid.*, 189.

²³ See *ibid.*, 190.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, 192.

When Florenskij talks of the Church as sacrament,²⁵ I could glimpse within him a forerunner of what Catholic theologians like Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner would explore and write about later, as well as what we have already seen from the *incipit* of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. When Florenskij uses the important phrases, “unity of the Church and Baptism” and “one Spirit,”²⁶ I could not help but recalling the renowned centuries-old inscription from the baptistery of the Lateran basilica:

Here is born a noble people from heaven. The Spirit gives them life in the fecund waters. Sinner, descend into the sacred font to be washed from your sins: You go down old, and return renewed in youth. Nothing can separate those who are reborn. They are one: one Baptism, one Spirit, one Faith.²⁷

Florenskij affirms that the true Body of Christ manifests itself in distinct liturgies, and is present in every particle of the Body and the Blood; just as one cannot say that a particle of the Body or Blood is a “fragment” of the Body of Christ, so also one cannot say that a particular local Church is just a “part” of the Church-Body. The Church in that particular expression is *whole*.²⁸ I could see in this an anticipation of the ecclesiological debate in the 1990s, in particular between Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger, regarding the relationship between the local Church and the universal Church. Which comes first? The chicken or the egg?

When Florenskij speaks of the infinite springs of divine grace²⁹ as experienced by the members of the Church, I recall the masterpiece by Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* – an excellent work with a highly elaborated pneumatological perspective on the liturgy.³⁰ I am happy to note that Florenskij also dwells upon the ethical responsibility of the baptized and thus their contribution to the holiness of the Church.³¹ This is an aspect I have often researched and written about, from time to time, namely the effect of transforming sacramental grace which leads individuals to orthopraxis.³²

²⁵ See *ibid.*, 196.

²⁶ See *ibid.*

²⁷ *Baptism. Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, Alba Patristic Library 2, ed. Adalbert Hamman (Staten Island/New York: Society of St Paul, 1967), 16-17.

²⁸ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 197.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 203.

³⁰ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* (Eugene/Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

³¹ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 204.

³² See Hector Scerri, *Koinonia, Diakonia and Martyria: Interrelated Themes in Patristic Sacramental Theology as Expounded by Adalbert-G. Hamman O.F.M.*, Melita Theologica Supplementary Series 4 (Malta: Foundation for Theological Studies, 1999); “Dall’*actuosa*

Florenskij insists that the Church exists not because we enter to become part of it, because for its existence it does not need us. It is rather a metaphysical reality and we can decide to enter or not to enter to be part of it. The metaphysical reality of the Church will not suffer any harm on account of our decision. We are in communion with the Body of Christ and we participate in it.³³

In Chapter 5, on the “Correlation between the Attributes of the Church and its Symbolic Definition,” Florenskij delves into the actual meaning of “body” and offers his interpretation, even by means of mathematical terminology.³⁴ This brings to mind the paper, delivered earlier in this symposium, by my colleague from the Department of Mathematics, Josef Lauri. His reflections enable us to start to understand Florenskij’s original and unique presentation on the Church using mathematics.

Florenskij then elaborates on the concepts of “body,” “building” and “spouse,” and subsequently upon “Body of Christ,” “Building of Christ” and “Bride of

participatio ad un’ortoprassi eucaristica autentica,” in Actiosa Participatio. Conoscere, comprendere e vivere la Liturgia. Studi in onore del Prof. Domenico Sartore, Monumenta Studia Instrumenta Liturgica 18, ed. Agostino Montan and Manlio Sodi (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 507-520; “Fides quaerens intellectum practico-socialem in the Writings of Adalbert-G. Hamman (1910-2000),” in Melita Theologica 55 (2004): 3-13; “The Social Morality of John Chrysostom: The Contribution of Adalbert Hamman (1910-2000),” in Giovanni Crisostomo. Oriente e occidente tra IV e V secolo. Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 93/1, XXXIII Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana, Roma, 6-8 maggio 2004 (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2005), 649-660; “Quotidieneté in the Writings of Adalbert-G. Hamman (1910-2000): The Existential Concern of a Twentieth-century Patristic Scholar,” in Studia Patristica 40, Papers presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2003, ed. F. Young, M. Edwards and P. Parvis (Leuven, Paris and Dudley/MA: Peeters, 2006), 331-336; “The Altar at the Crossroads,” in The Times [Malta] (24 April 2009): 8; “The Eucharist and Freedom: Recalling the Impact of the Magisterium of Pope John Paul II at the International Eucharistic Congress at Wroclaw (1997),” in The Person and the Challenges 2/1 (2012): 193-206; “The Christian Agape Meal: A Manifestation of Koinonia and Diakonia. The Contribution of Adalbert-Gautier Hamman,” in Melita Theologica 62 (2012): 55-71; “The Inextricable Relationship Binding Together Participation in the Sacrament of Christ’s Love and Eucharistic Orthopraxis,” in The Holy Eucharist and the Hymn ‘T’Adoriam, Ostia Divina: Singing its Praises and Praising its Transforming Grace, ed. Hector Scerri and Joe Zammit Ciantar (Malta: Foundation for Theological Studies and Faculty of Theology, 2014), 11-31; “The Eucharist and Freedom in Contemporary Theologians and in the Magisterium of Pope John Paul II,” in The Quest for Authenticity and Human Dignity. A Festschrift in Honour of Professor George Grima on his 70th Birthday, ed. Emmanuel Agius and Hector Scerri (Malta: Faculty of Theology/University of Malta and Foundation for Theological Studies, 2015), 395-417.

³³ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 213, note I.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 227.

Christ,”³⁵ as well as upon the presence, in the Church, of the laity, the clerics and the charismatics.³⁶ Florenskij also focuses upon the foundation of the Church, namely the profession of faith in Christ,³⁷ the different charisms and the corner-stone.³⁸ The Building-image, he affirms, is insufficient, and so he proceeds to the Body-image,³⁹ and later to the image of Church as bride.⁴⁰ The latter would be developed widely by twentieth-century theologians, such as Yves Congar (*I Believe in the Holy Spirit*),⁴¹ Charles Journet (*L'Église du Verbe Incarné*)⁴² and Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Sponsa Verbi*).⁴³ The image of the tree,⁴⁴ which Florenskij uses, reminds me of the text on the development of the Church and the development of dogma by Vincent of Lerins in his *Commonitorium* (22). Florenskij beautifully presents the image of the disciples as “friends of the bridegroom”⁴⁵ in the context of the intimate relationship Christ–Church, as well as the particular role of John the Baptist.⁴⁶

In Chapter 6, on the “Allegorical Definition of the Church and its Relation to the Kingdom of God,” Florenskij explains that if it is difficult to trace a clear distinction between the metaphysical and symbolic definition of the Church, it is even more difficult to make the distinction between the symbolical and the allegorical.⁴⁷ He distinguishes between the Church and the Kingdom of God, although there is a very close relationship between the two. This was pronounced clearly, decades later, in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II.

All in all, the work by Florenskij offers an interesting presentation on the Church – a presentation with strong biblical and patristic foundations, while offering, what to my mind, is an innovative perspective on the Church as a metaphysical reality. Etymological insights also provide the reader with a path to grasp the theme holistically. Finally, my encounter with Florenskij, and

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 230, 234.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 232.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, 237.

³⁸ See *ibid.*, 240.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 255.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, 275.

⁴¹ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols (New York and London: Seabury Press and Geoffrey Chapman, 1983).

⁴² Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné: Essai de théologie spéculative*, II, *Sa structure interne et son unité catholique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952).

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Sponsa Verbi* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1971).

⁴⁴ See Florenskij, *Il concetto di Chiesa*, 256.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, 307.

in particular *The Concept of Church in Sacred Scripture* which my colleague, Paul Sciberras, and I have presented, leads me to affirm unhesitatingly that in the Russian theologian, I could glimpse a forerunner of what Henri de Lubac would later elaborate upon in his several works (a least five) on the mystery of the Church, in particular *The Splendour of the Church*.⁴⁸ Perhaps both budding scholars as well as seasoned theologians might explore the interface between Florenskij's ecclesiology and de Lubac's. That could be the theme of a future colloquium ... either in Moscow or in Lyon ... or, perhaps, in Malta!

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⁴⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).