



## Fellowship Footnotes

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in [the] prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Having to explain who the Fellowship of St. John the Divine (the FELLOWSHIP) is, what it does and its target audience is probably the most daunting task each FELLOWSHIP president has to do; and most often unsuccessfully. To help with this, the FELLOWSHIP has launched a few years ago this series of Fellowship Footnotes presenting each month a different look at some aspects of the life of the FELLOWSHIP.

Perhaps the main difficulty resides in that the FELLOWSHIP is not constrained to an artificial demographic division, be it an age-group, gender, or social class. Perhaps the answer is more complicated since “fellowship” implies a mystical relationship, as we shall see later on in the words of our patron saint, the Holy Evangelist John. This relationship is convolved with other aspects of Christian living which the early Church practiced and which we tend to forget about amidst the many distractions which cloud our lifestyles. Perhaps it would be helpful for us today to examine precisely this kind of understanding of fellowship, which the Apostle describes in the book of Acts.

### Fellowship in the life of the Church<sup>1</sup>

“And they continued steadfastly **in the apostles’ doctrine**” (**ti didachi ton apostolon**<sup>2</sup>): the Church has existed in its fullness since the day of Pentecost. While living in fellowship, the early Christians held on “steadfastly” to the apostolic teachings. To this day, the Church’s unwavering belief is that “Christ revealed, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers safeguarded.” This is why, the apostolic succession of bishops, the dispensers of the apostolic teaching to the faithful, is very important in the Orthodox Church. Any deviation from apostolic teaching wounds the

fellowship of the Church. As the Holy Apostle Paul explains, the Church being one body – the body of Christ – when one member of this body suffers the whole body suffers.<sup>3</sup>

“... **and fellowship**” (**kai ti koinonia**<sup>4</sup>): In Greek, the word for fellowship also means communion, and refers to the intimacy felt by members of the Church through the Holy Spirit. For the Orthodox Christian, the ultimate example of koinonia is Holy Communion, which brings us in complete (and visible) union with Christ and with our brothers and sisters.

“... **in the breaking of bread**” (**kai tou klasei tou artou**<sup>5</sup>): In the Greek text, the words used here specifically refer to the Eucharistic celebration of the Divine Liturgy<sup>6</sup>. Holy Communion has always been the central element from which stems the whole life of the Church. St. Paul warned the early Church of serving and partaking of Holy Communion without koinonia in the Church.<sup>7</sup> So important is the Eucharist in the life of the Church, that St. Ignatius of Antioch calls it the “medicine of immortality” (*pharmakon tis athanasias*<sup>8</sup>), since the communicant receives Christ’s resurrected body, which becomes the antidote to death.

“... **and in the prayers**” (**kai tais prosevchais**<sup>9</sup>): The Greek text specifically says “*the prayers*”, a reference to liturgical or communal prayers used by the Church. No surprise there of course, since the apostles, after all, came from a Judaic liturgical tradition lived in the temple.

Therefore, as it was in the early Church, it remains today that fellowship in the Orthodox Church cannot be separated from her doctrine or worship. At a time when all realities, even spiritual realities, seem to be compartmentalized, the Orthodox

Church maintains today that a separation between fellowship, worship, and doctrine is foreign and artificial. Fellowship (whether inside the Church building, on campus, at work or at home, or even on the streets or in prisons) must start from and come back to the worship of the Church. At all times, the Orthodox Church affirms that she is primarily a worshipping Church, and that her worship is her theology<sup>10</sup>. Evagrius, a fourth-century monastic writer, said that “if you are a theologian you will truly pray, and if you truly pray you will be a theologian<sup>11</sup>.” The view that theology is restricted to an elite few and does not concern the “regular Church-goer” is foreign to the mind of the Church. Instead, she teaches that, by virtue of baptism, the faithful is ordained into the order of Laos, a word which literally means people, and refers to an actual order of the Church<sup>12</sup>. With that ordination, the Church affirms that all who are baptized are called to pray: all are called to become theologians.

### **The Fellowship of St. John the Divine**

So far we have presented a sort of introduction to the life of the Church as fellowship grounded in apostolic doctrine and worship, but it seems like we have said nothing about the FELLOWSHIP. The implications will become clearer in a second. We live in times in which we are conditioned to see the Church as part of the world we live in. However, for the Orthodox mind, the Church is not in the world, but rather the world is in the Church. To say it in other words, the Church is everything that the world is called to be. It follows then that the life of the Church we described is the life of the faithful, the members of the body of Christ.

By extension, this life is also the life of the FELLOWSHIP, an organization whose purpose is to cultivate a relationship among the faithful based on the life of the Church. To understand this relationship among the faithful, we must focus on what, or more precisely *who*, it is that binds them. St. John the Evangelist (also called the Theologian for the spiritual depth of his writings), starts his universal letter to the Church, with these words:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes,

which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of Life – the life was manifested and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the father and was manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship (koinonia) with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:1-3).

St. John beautifully links the fellowship of the Church to the life of the Holy Trinity<sup>13</sup>. Our participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, known as deification (or theosis<sup>14</sup>), is the central goal of the Christian life. It is also the central purpose behind who the FELLOWSHIP is and everything that it does. The FELLOWSHIP exists to constantly remind us of this central focus in our lives. As the Evangelist notes, theosis is made possible through experience (even sensory experience) which we, too, can have with the Son of God, precisely because He “was with the Father and was manifest to us.” This experience is ever present in the Church and is accessible to us today in her sacramental life.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul explains: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20). This is how theosis is manifested in the life of the Christian, and which leads one to repeat the words of the Baptist “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30). These words are a solid reminder for ministry in the Church: just like a priest does not perform his personal ministry but the ministry of Christ, the Great High Priest, likewise an organization, like the FELLOWSHIP, does not have its own ministry or agenda, but participates in the ministry of Christ, the only true minister.

I believe, and this is my personal opinion, that outside of this understanding of theosis and fellowship in the life of the Church, the FELLOWSHIP is reduced to a nebulous organization, a void-filler, a collection of projects, or just an administrative body that coordinates different programs for the Archdiocese, all of which are terms I have heard personally (and I’m sure you’ve heard some more). The programs run by the FELLOWSHIP fall within a four-fold

vision, focusing on worship, fellowship, witness and service. The ultimate goal is to provide a spiritual balance for the faithful to live a Christ-center life, protected by the time-tested witness of the Church, and the prayers of our patron and intercessor, St. John the Divine, the Evangelist, the Theologian, the Beloved.

by Nicolas Ellaham

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<sup>1</sup> What follows in this section is a brief summary from notes taken during 4 weeks spent unpacking one verse (Acts 2:42) at the OCF Bible Studies at the University of Ottawa led by OCF chaplain Fr. Maxym Lysack.

<sup>2</sup> Greek: τη διδαχη των αποστολων

<sup>3</sup> cf. 1.Cor. 12:26.

<sup>4</sup> Greek: και τη κοινωνια

<sup>5</sup> Greek: και του κλασει του αρτου

<sup>6</sup> The same word is also used in Luke 24:35, Acts 2:46, Acts 20:7, and 1.Cor. 10:16.

<sup>7</sup> cf. 1.Cor. 11:17-22.

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius to the Ephesians 20:2 (Greek: φαρμακον της αθανασιας).

<sup>9</sup> Greek: και ταις προσευχαις

<sup>10</sup> The Latin expression *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (which can be loosely translated as the law of prayer is the law of belief) is often used to refer to this relationship between worship and belief.

<sup>11</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *“The Greek Ascetic Corpus”*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, tr. by R.E. Sinkewicz, p. 199.

<sup>12</sup> There are four orders in the Orthodox Church not just three: the episcopate, the priesthood, the diaconate, and the Laos (Greek: λαός).

<sup>13</sup> The trinity is not explicitly mentioned in the text, only the Father and His Son are mentioned. It would require pages to discuss the Holy Trinity, but suffice to say here, that it is the Orthodox understanding that only in the Holy Spirit are we able to have fellowship “with the Father and with His Son”.

<sup>14</sup> Greek: Θέωσις