

A Letter to a Bishop Who Asked What Was Our Position About Grace in Heterodox Mysteries.

February 6 / January 24, 2004
St. Xenia of St. Petersburg

Your Eminence,

I hope this letter finds you well and in the peace of the Savior. Thanks be to God, near the beginning of this year, I had a mild stroke which has left me incapacitated in part, for the time being.

I am sorry I have not answered sooner. The questions that you asked about the Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Heterodox have been covered in many texts of the Church and in Church History. They are matters, therefore, that are settled, and as an Orthodox bishop I cannot transgress these Synodal decisions and precedents. Also, it is not a matter of sin or virtue of particular people. As we have been taught by the Holy Fathers, again and again: sin is a transgression of God's teachings, but heresy is *an alteration* of God's teachings. We are all sinners, but we are not all in heresy.

One other thing that needs to be kept in mind is, as we can see from many incidents in Church History [see, for example, our "Statement of 2003" on our website], that when the "break" with the Orthodox is still fresh – when the wound is still warm – there is still "wobble room" in the matter of the validity of the mysteries of the heterodox. Whereas, when decades and, certainly, when centuries have passed, there is no question about the existence of Grace in the heterodox mysteries. This is because God's loving *economia* takes into account the souls of those who are in heresy or schism out of confusion. On the other hand, when the Holy Synods and the Holy Fathers deal with entrenched and hardened heresies, they are clear that the latter are both invalid and indeed non-existent. I will give you a short list of these decisions and teachings so that you may understand the mind of the Fathers. These decrees are not simply my personal opinion or belief, but what the Church has always taught.

46th Apostolic Canon

We ordain that a bishop, or presbyter who has admitted the baptism or sacrifice of heretics be deposed. For what concord hath Christ with Belial, or what part hath a believer with an infidel?

47th Apostolic Canon

Let a bishop or presbyter who shall baptize again one who has rightly received Baptism, or who shall not baptize one who has been polluted by the ungodly, be deposed, as despising the Cross and death of the Lord, and not making a distinction between the true priests and the false.

68th Apostolic Canon

If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon shall receive from anyone a second ordination, let both the ordained and the ordainer be deposed, unless indeed it be proved that he had his ordination from heretics; for those who have been baptized or ordained by such persons cannot be either of the faithful or

of the clergy.

Canon I of the Local Council of Carthage

Those baptized by heretics shall be rebaptized to be admitted to the Church.

Canon 32 of the Local Council of Laodicaea

The blessings of heretics are curses.

Canon 8 of the Local Council of Laodicaea A.D. 343-381

Persons converted from the heresy of those who are called Phrygians, even should they be among those reputed by them as clergymen, and even should they be called the very chiefest, are with all care to be both instructed and baptized by the bishops and presbyters of the Church.

Canon 32 of the Local Council of Laodicaea A.D. 343-381

It is unlawful to receive the blessings of heretics, for they are rather follies than blessings.

Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Book 6, paragraph 15

Be ye likewise content with one baptism alone, that which is unto the death of the Lord; not that which is conferred by wicked heretics, but that which is conferred by unblameable priests, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:" (Matthew 28:19) and let not that which comes from the ungodly be received by you, nor let that which is done by the godly be disannulled by a second. For as there is one God, one Christ, and one Comforter, and one death of the Lord in the body, so let that baptism which is unto Him be but one. But those that receive polluted baptism from the ungodly will become partners in their opinions. For they are not priests. For God says to them: "Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee from the office of a priest to me" (Hosea 4:6). Nor indeed are those that are baptized by them initiated, but are polluted, not receiving the remission of sins, but the bond of impiety.

We are also taught by the Fathers that the Spirit of truth does not operate in the heterodox. For example, in his book *On the Trinity*, in Book 9, Chapter 35, St. Hilary of Poitiers addresses the heretics and says, "but you are narrow, heretic, and unable to receive the Holy Spirit." Pope Leo the Great in *Letter 159* says that the sanctification of the Holy Spirit is something "that no one can receive from heretics, but may be obtained from Catholic [i.e. Orthodox] priests." In *Letter 167*, Question 18, the same Saint addresses the question of those in heresy receiving the Holy Spirit in baptism and says the following:

Question 18. Concerning those who have come from Africa or Mauretania and know not in what sect they were baptized, what ought to be done in their

case?

Reply. These persons are not doubtful of their baptism, but profess ignorance as to the faith of those who baptized them: and hence since they have received the *form* of baptism in some way or other, they are not to be baptized but are to be united to the catholics by imposition of hands, after the invocation of the Holy Spirit's power, which they could not receive from heretics.

In *Letter 159*, he confirms this by saying:

8. *About the baptism of heretics.*

For they who have received baptism from heretics, not having been previously baptized, are to be confirmed by the imposition of hands with only the invocation of the Holy Spirit, because they have received *the bare form* of baptism without the power of sanctification.

In speaking about the mysteries of the heterodox in *Epistle 63*, St Cyprian of Carthage teaches us that the oblation of heretics cannot be consecrated since they have not the Holy Spirit. St. Vincent of Lerins says the following as well:

3rd *Discourse Against the Heretics.*

So how can it be said that the baptism given by them [heretics] is not perfectly useless and vain? Though it does appear to be a baptism in pretense, yet in reality it is of no help to faith and piety. For it is not he that says merely "O Lord" that gives a correct baptism. But he that utters the invocation of the name and at the same time possesses *a correct faith* ... It is for this reason, indeed, that many other heresies, true enough, do say the same names of the Holy Trinity, but inasmuch as they do not believe these correctly and they have not a sound faith either, the baptism given by them is of no benefit to them, owing to its lacking piety. So that as a matter of fact the consequence is that anyone "sprinkled" by them is rather polluted with impiety than redeemed from it.

and Caecilius of Bilita says the following:

I know only one baptism in the Church, and none out of the Church. This one will be here, where there is the true hope and the certain faith. For thus it is written: "One faith, one hope, one baptism:" not among heretics, where there is no hope, and the faith is false, where all things are carried on by lying.

In regard to the interpretation of our Lord's words, "In my Father's house are many mansions:" (St John 14:2a), virtually all of the patristic interpretations say that this refers to different degrees of Grace among the Saints in Paradise, but *none* of the interpretations say that it refers to different denominations here on earth. As an Orthodox bishop, I have been taught that I must not give my own personal interpretation to the Scriptures, but

must follow in the footsteps of our Holy Fathers.

I have written to you in brief, my beloved brother. There are many more references that could have been given regarding this matter, but I wanted to reply relatively quickly. There is much we can speak about, but I think you understand my guiding principles. Thank you for your love. I hope that I have in some limited way answered your questions. I wait to hear from you.

In Christ,

Metropolitan Ephraim