**“Tradition, Catholicity and the Mind of the Church”**

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In recent years several positive theological encounters have taken place between Evangelical and Orthodox Christians at global, denominational, institutional and personal levels. Our meeting here in Albania will figure among the most important we have had. It has helped to foster a greater understanding of each other, and create mutual trust as children of the same Trinitarian God.

Nevertheless, we are all painfully aware that we do not eat from the same loaf, or drink from the same cup of communion. The goals of this brief presentation, therefore, are two-fold and in two parts: In the first 15-minute segment, I want to address evangelicals. Here I wish to paint a picture of the process by which the Orthodox tradition appropriates Christian truth. A glimpse of that picture will help evangelicals to better understand how the saving realities of the gospel are apprehended in the life of the church. By understanding how “the mind of the church” works (as Fr. Flovovsky once called it) evangelicals can support the Orthodox more effectively in our common task of missions. In the second segment, I want to address my fellow Orthodox. There, I would like to answer the question, What can we learn from evangelicals that will enable us to better live out the gospel that is already present within our own tradition? So the first task is to help evangelicals understand us, while the second task is see what we can learn from them.

**Part 1: Evangelicals and “the mind” of the Orthodox Church**

One of the greatest ecumenical difficulties the Orthodox Church has faced in her dealings with others is the alienation of her thought forms as compared with those of the Christian West. The late Fr. George Florovsky referred to our ways of theologizing as a “mind-set” (*phronema*). He points out that the church’s understanding of the faith comes not so much from a systematic “method” (such as scholasticism or a Calvinists’ “t-u-l-i-p”). Rather, our approach to Revelation is an all-encompassing “frame of mind,” if you please. So my goal is to talk about that “mind-set” in only 15 minutes…!

**First, the “mind of the church” is an “ecclesial” mind. It includes a “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) – both biblical and historical-- that are centered around Jesus Christ and holy Scripture.** The tradition consists supremely of Scripture, but also the church’s sacramental rites, liturgical texts, dogmas of the Ecumenical Councils, writings of the church fathers and mothers, canon law, and the lives of saints. Together, these sources create a chorus of voices that bear witness to salvation through Jesus Christ, in His Trinitarian relations.[[1]](#footnote-1) The “mind of the church,” therefore, is an “ecclesial” mind. It is “the mind of Christ” who is the “head” of the church. These multiple sources of the church’s faith work symbiotically, each giving life to the other, with Scripture and the apostolic tradition[[2]](#footnote-2) serving as the fountain from which all else springs. It is one thing to state this vision in words, but quite another to experience its fullness. Perhaps the only way a non-Orthodox Christian can fully understand this “cloud of witness” is by *immersing themself in the liturgical life of the church.*  So the first thing for evangelicals to do is to go to an Orthodox church on a regular basis.

**Second, the “mind of the church” is one which “follows the Holy Fathers.”** As the Chalcedonian Definition (451 CE) expresses it: “Following the holy fathers, we confess….” This expression was much more than just “an appeal to antiquity.” Antiquity itself is no proof of truth in and of itself. Rather, to “follow the holy fathers” is a way of embracing the memory of the church in an authoritative way. Fr. John Meyendorff of blessed memory states it well:

“There is no Orthodoxy without Holy Tradition, which implies communion in Spirit and in truth with the witness of the apostles and the fathers, based upon the belief that, by the power of God and in spite of all historical human weaknesses, there was and there is an uninterrupted, consistent and continuous Holy Tradition of faith held by the Church throughout the centuries. This belief in Tradition is not identical with simple conservatism. Holy Tradition is a living tradition. It is a witness to the unchanging Truth in a changing world.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Third, “the mind of the church” is a “catholic” mind that is centered on Christ’s presence in the local church and its structures of communion.** The local church is the key to understanding Orthodox ecclesiology. That is why the “mind of the church” is “catholic” (*katholikos*) meaning “according to the whole.” The term is used in a *qualitiative* sense, not a quantitative one. It expresses not universality, nor a fullness that is located exclusively in Rome, but one that is rooted in each local church which is in communion with its local bishop who, in turn, is in communion with other local bishops: St. Ignatius of Antioch put it this way: “Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as, wherever Christ Jesus is, there is the catholic church.” The connection between the bishop and the catholic church in this text (and others beyond the parameters of this paper) indicates that each local church is catholic. Ignatius describes the Eucharistic unity of this communion of local churches when he says: “Be careful therefore to use one Eucharist so that whatever you do you it may be according to God. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow servants.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Against the Gnostics, he affirms that the “catholic church” is the church of holistic teaching (orthodoxy), in opposition to schism and heresy, which are particular teachings. Hence the “catholic church” resides in each local community. It is the fullness of apostolic life, preaching and teaching. It is the church of the one Eucharist under the presidency of the one bishop in each local church, i.e. a “Eucharistic ecclesiology.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The authority of the local church under its bishop is one that is *relational and interdependent.* The bishop is part of the community -- not *above* it as a dictator, but *within* it as an image of Christ and unity of the church. Such are the ecclesial structures that facilitate communion among the local Orthodox churches. And that is largely why we are unable to share a common cup of communion with evangelicals. Our faith with them is not yet one with our bishops and local churches.

**Fourth, “the mind of the church” maintains an inseparable link between the church and its dogmas, worship and spiritual life. Thus we remember the past differently than evangelicals.** Perhaps I can explain this with the help of beautiful flower. Let’s say the stem of the flower signifies doctrine, and the bud signifies the spiritual and sacramental life of the church that comes from the doctrine. In Orthodoxy – as in evangelicalism – doctrine and life belong together. We cannot have true doctrine without true worship (*lex orandi lex est credendi*), nor true worship without sound doctrine. This common ground sets Orthodox and evangelicals apart from most contemporary ecumenical relations. Most ecumenical dialogues today seek unity in common social action rather than truth. Orthodox and evangelicals, however, are united on the centrality of true doctrine and true worship (which is why our meeting this week is so promising). Yet it is here that the Orthodox must gently invite our evangelical brothers and sisters to reassess the consistency of their own convictions.

A prime example of our differing relationships to historic Christianity may be taken from the conciliar work of the Ecumenical Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. Most Evangelicals strongly support the Trinitarian faith of the Nicene Creed (325/81 CE), and the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ confessed by the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE). They, with us, concur that these beliefs summarize biblical doctrine on the Person of Christ and the Trinity. Yet what appears to be lacking within evangelicalism is a failure to keep the Great Tradition of these councils *connected* to the Great Church that produced them. Evangelicals seem to approach the past as one would approach a library: Take what you like and leave what you don’t. They take the doctrine, but not the church to which it belonged. I do understand that the criteria for embracing the faith of the Councils is a Reformation criteria of *sola scriptura* (which even itself is not uniformly defined by Anabaptists, Lutherans, Calvinists and Anglicans)*.* But my point is that the church and its biblical dogmas go hand in hand. What evangelicals seem to fail to recognize is *the ecclesiology that lies behind the Ecumenical Councils.* It is vital for us to see that there was a *pre-existing sacramental unity* among local churches that was already in place by the time the Councils were convened. The bishops and churches were sufficiently united in the Eucharistic structure and theological content of their local communities to enable them to gather as one to confess their belief in one Lord and one faith.[[6]](#footnote-6) The church of the Ecumenical Councils possessed a common ontological identity in a pre-existing unity of holy tradition. For the Councils, division means the falling away from the true faith of *the local sacramental communities and their* *catholic agreement*, not the breaking away from an institutional church per se (as Rome might conceive it).[[7]](#footnote-7) The Ecumenical Councils that evangelicals prize with the Orthodox were functions of the “catholic” communities that confessed the faith and order of a church that had, and continues to have, a visible and historical continuity. But few evangelicals seem to make these connections. To put it simply, evangelicals want the “stem” without the “flower.” They approve the doctrine but cut off the church which confessed it. So the Orthodox, this is not a truly “catholic” appropriation of the past, in the Ignatian and Irenaean senses noted previously. Rather, it is a highly individualized approach to faith that has led to *interpretive anarchy* and some 30,000 denominations in the 21st century.

The pre-existing -- and continuing -- ecclesial unity in Orthodoxy represents a major difference with evangelicals in their mind-set and orientation to the faith. “Orthodoxy,” for us, signifies the fullness of tradition and sacramental unity in faith. The “mind of Christ” and “the mind of the church” cannot be divorced. Christ’s Person is *communal*. The “mind of the church” is focused on the incarnate Person of Jesus Christ in His Trinitarian relations. That is why Orthodox theology must view evangelical communities as possessing only a portion of the faith of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” It is only in this context that Orthodox and evangelicals can discuss the particulars of their theological commitments (i.e. justification by faith, *theosis*, *sola Scriptura*, the nature of the atonement, the efficacy of the sacraments and so on).

So I invite evangelicals to consider the perspectives given above as they relate to our common work of missions and evangelism.

**Part 2: What Missiological Lessons Can We Learn from Evangelicals?**

As we move into the future, Orthodox and evangelicals agree that a sound basis for a common witness to the gospel rests on a common commitment to Christian truth. Yet ecclesiological differences remain, as we noted in our first presentation. So we must ask: *Does the absence of full communion doom us to division? If so, then why are we here?* The very fact that most of us have travelled hundreds, if not thousands of miles to be here is a visible sign that we all believe that unity, at some level, is possible. So I’d like to pivot away from the issues I raised in my first talk that was addressed to evangelicals. Now I’d like to address the Orthodox and ask, *What can we learn from evangelicals? Is there something vitally important that we need to hear which will better enable us to live out the gospel that is already present in our church?*

Regrettably, few Orthodox theologians and churchmen understand who evangelicals are and what unites them. For some, the Baptists, charismatics, and Free Church denominations are no different than Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Moonies. All such groups exist in one great sea of undifferentiated darkness! This view, however, is unfair and untrue. Evangelicals are not cults nor are they particular denominations. Who, then, are they? They are a trans-denominational movement that is held together by a common set of theological *emphases*.[[8]](#footnote-8) I stress the word *emphases* because their accents express their identity. Because of that, dialogue with evangelicals is often decentralized and situational by its very nature.

In previous writings, I have analyzed thetheologicalidentityof evangelicalism and compared it with how the Orthodox tradition has handled those same themes in its own theological history.[[9]](#footnote-9) The most important conclusion is this: *The gospel lies at the very heart of Orthodox theology and permeates its liturgical and spiritual life.[[10]](#footnote-10) The gospel is the common ground we share with evangelicals, and that is what makes it possible for us to cooperate in world evangelization*. However, our methods of evangelism will look different because of our differing ecclesiologies. (This is worth discussing in our small groups).

I will not belabor the historiography on evangelical history. There are competing ways to define the movement, but we need a widely accepted definition of evangelicalism in order to interact with it. Such a definition comes from David Bebbington who identifies four unifying emphases:[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. The Cross --Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of sins (crucicentrism).
2. The Bible -- is the inspired Word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word (biblicism).
3. A Call to conversion -- People need to commit their lives to Jesus Christ and be converted (conversionism).
4. Service -- It is important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians and to engage in a life of service (activism).

These four distinctives form the basis of the following answers to the question “What missiological lessons can we learn from evangelicals?”

**First, we need to answer the question, Will the real evangelical please stand up?** The evangelicalism of today is not the evangelicalism of yesterday. It is a moving target. The Orthodox need to be aware of this when dealing with people in the movement. Currents within contemporary evangelicalism are rapidly questioning and reshaping its past identity due to postmodernist influences[[12]](#footnote-12) and differing definitions of the very meaning of the term “gospel.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This has both positive and negative effects. Negatively, evangelical postmodernism tends to undermine the theological moorings of the movement which could significantly disrupt future areas of agreement with the Orthodox. Positively, a widening definition of an evangelical understanding of the “gospel” is underway that comports well with Orthodox Christology. No longer is evangelicalism restricted mainly to the primacy of justification by faith and substitutionary atonement, even though an influential Reformed body of evangelicals still insist on the priority these emphases should have in defining the movement’s identity. A progressive wing in evangelicalism is beginning to see the gospel as embracing *the whole* of the Incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and second coming while retaining its emphasis on the cross. So the Orthodox will need to keep abreast of these developments as we seek common missionary action.

**Second, cooperative evangelism seems to be a viable model for Orthodox-Evangelical outreach today.** Billy Graham still has something to teach us about this.In recent times, the World Evangelical Alliance has expressed concern about Orthodox persecution of evangelicals by the Orthodox in places like Russia and other traditional Orthodox countries.[[14]](#footnote-14) Likewise, the Orthodox have expressed concern that evangelical missionaries have little appreciation for the religious and cultural heritage of Orthodox Christians, and that “folk religion” does not accurately represent the Orthodox faith. The Moscow and Romanian patriarchates, however, have demonstrated in the past that Orthodox and evangelicals can work together successfully, as was done in earlier times under the Billy Graham evangelistic campaigns. Nominal Orthodox Christians who responded to the gospel under Billy Graham’s preaching were not “proselytized,” but directed to good Orthodox churches for discipleship. Similar cooperative ventures should be possible today, if there is a will to do so. I see no reason why we cannot have a united voice that bears witness to the saving gospel of Jesus Christ – His Incarnation, sacrificial death, resurrection from the dead and the call to repentance and personal faith in Him as Lord and Savior. That is what our baptismal service requires, and our mystical theologians call us to embrace when we are adults. Even our venerable monastic saints ask us to take up a life of repentance and faith. The prime examples are Sts. Antony of Egypt, (Pseudo) Makarios, Mark the Monk, Symeon the New Theologian, Ignatius Briancaninoff and others.

**Third – and closely related to the second point above – is that evangelicals challenge** **Orthodox Christians to make the gospel clear, central and compelling in every life-giving action of the church.** Spiritual renewal of the local church is urgently needed today. We are required by our own faith to affirm the emphases of evangelicalism cited above because we ourselves embrace, and transcend, them in our Christological and Trinitarian theology. The critical difference between us, however, is that evangelicalism is *minimalist* in its evangelical identity, while Orthodoxy is *maximimalist* in its evangelical faith. That is the crux of our known and continuing differences. Even though we agree on these four distinctives, we vary widely on their theological *implications*. The implications of the gospel go far to explain our differences in biblical interpretation, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, liturgy, iconography and spiritual life. I develop this at length in my essay on “The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church.”

Yet, there must come a time when dialogue is converted into action. *I am convinced that the most urgent need in the Orthodox world today is the need for an aggressive internal mission of evangelizing our own nominal people to personal faith in Jesus Christ!*  Nominalism is the number one problem facing world Orthodoxy today. Evangelicalism challenges our bishops, priests and lay leaders to make the gospel much clearer and more central to our parishioners’ lives than we are doing. That is the most likely reason why Orthodox people leave the church today and join evangelical communities. The gospel is not being made openly clear, central and compelling by our bishops, priests and lay leaders! Evangelicals remind us that just because the gospel is *in* the life of the church does not mean that our people have *understood and appropriated* *its message*. As an Orthodox theologian, I must concede that there is a tragic gap between Orthodox principles and Orthodox practice. But our people do not need to leave the church to find fulfillment in Christ. All that we need for spiritual renewal is contained within our very own theology and church life. But it needs to be talked about. T*he gospel must be made clear, central and compelling to every person in each generation*. Whether through preaching, the confessional, personal conversations, or separate preaching sessions, Orthodox evangelism needs to take place much more aggressively than we have done to date, especially among the youth. It is possible for our young people to attend church, take communion, venerate the icons and end up *religious, but lost* (just as I was when I was young man). It is not without reason that the Book of the Gospels rests on the center of the altar in every Orthodox Church around the world. This liturgical symbolism tells us if we truly want to be people of the gospel, we will need to constantly recover the personal and relational aspects of God in every life-giving action of the church. Perhaps if we humble ourselves before our evangelical brothers and sisters and listen to the simplicity of their message we will rediscover the true meaning of our own faith and, in the process, bring them with us into the fullness of the Orthodox Church.

**Small Group Questions:**

Based on the above material, consider the following questions together:

1. “Tradition” for the Orthodox entails much more than simply celebrating old family customs. Tradition involves catholicity in the full and all-embracing sense as described in Dr. Nassif’s presentation. How does the “mind of the Orthodox Church” compare and contrast with an evangelical approach to theological decision-making?

2. In what ways can an Orthodox understanding of the local church (with its focus on the Eucharist and episcopal structures of communion) both help and hinder cooperation with evangelicals?

3. Is cooperative evangelism possible? If not, what is there in our affirmation of the gospel that prevents us from a common witness? If cooperative evangelism is possible, try to identify concrete ways we may work together for the spread of the good news.

4. How can Orthodox and evangelicals work together to reach nominal Orthodox Christians? What are some theological resources within Orthodoxy itself that requires them to engage in an internal mission of (re)converting its own people to faith in Jesus Christ (i.e. its sacraments, worship, monastic and mystical tradition etc.)?

5. How does Orthodoxy’s *maximalist* vision of an incarnational Trinitarian faith challenge the *minimalism* of evangelical church life? Areas to consider are a liturgical and sacramental vision of reality, iconography, hymnography, the communion of the saints etc.

6. What can Orthodox bishops, priests and laypeople do to keep the gospel clear, central and compelling in every life-giving action of the church?

1. Bradley Nassif, – “ ‘Authority’ in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition” in *By What Authority*? edited by Robert Millet (Mercer University Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Irenaeus *Against Heresies,* Book 3 for the functions of creed, canon and clergy in the refutation of the Gnostic heresies. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Meyendorff in *The Legacy of St. Vladimir’s* ed. J. Breck, J. Meyendorff, and E. Silk (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1990), 15. See also John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition* (St. Vladimir’s Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Epistle to the Smyrnians*, par. 8; *Epistle to the Ephesians* par. 20.2).

   Adolf von Harnack and his children have claimed that Ignatius was the creator or promoter of the office of one bishop over one church (“monepiscopate” or “monarchical episcopate” as it is called). If correct, we have a major innovation in church government that is different from what we find in the New Testament. However, Thomas Robinson gives three reasons why such a thesis cannot be sustained (*Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways*, 99-102): 1) Ignatius shows no awareness of a need to explain his use of the term “bishop.” The churches he addresses in Asia Minor understood him because the office had already been established. 2) Ignatius’s amanuensis (secretary), Burrhus, was a leader of the church at Ephesus. Nothing in Ignatius’s letters suggests an awareness of the need to clarify the term “bishop.” 3) Ignatius identifies several people from the five churches of Asia by name and rank as “bishop, presbyter or deacon.” He does not appoint them as bishops, but recognizes them as already existing. If he were appointing them as bishops (instead of recognizing them as already existing) he would have needed to say more to this effect. Thus Ignatius is defining the nature of the church, not instituting the office of bishop. I add a 4th reason): There is no evidence of any outcry against the office of bishop in church sources of the second century. If it was an innovation, one would have expected to see opposition to it, but none is found. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Metropolitan Maximos Aghiorgoussis, “The Unity of the Church: An Orthodox Point of View” in *Together in Christ: Studies in Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 235 ff. This is an extremely valuable book on Orthodox ecumenism. In this chapter, Maximos partly synthesizes and develops the work of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the First Three Centuries*, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001); J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (St. Vladimir’s Press, 1985). John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The crisis of the Arian movement in 318 (and the Christological controversies which followed) was part of a larger movement in the early church. The movement was from the church’s “rule of faith” (i.e. what the church ‘confessed’) to theology, i.e. from the *language of confession* to the *language of reflection on that confession*. The Fathers of the early 4th century could easily quote creedal statements that were given in baptism and elsewhere, but they could not so easily explain them. Their task in the Councils centered on *how to explain the faith in the language of reflection*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. George Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox* *View* (Belmont Mass, 1979). Florovsky observes that the Ecumenical Councils were not to be seen as institutions but as *charismatic* witnesses to the gospel. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*, eds. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bradley Nassif, “The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church” in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. James Stamoolis (Zondervan, 2004); and “Orthodox Spirituality: The Quest for a Transfigured Life” in *Christian Spirituality: Four Views*, ed. Bruce Demarest (Zondervan, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Orthodox theologians of the 20th century have developed a series of ways of describing our ecclesiology from various perspectives. Such terms are “communion ecclesiology,” “Eucharistic ecclesiology,” “trinitarian ecclesiology” and “baptismal ecclesiology.” John Erickson introduced the last refinement which he called “baptismal ecclesiology.” Erickson saw this as both a completion and a corrective of the shortcomings of “Eucharistic ecclesiology.” He says, “The church is a Eucharistic organism but only because the church is a baptismal organism….Emphasis has been on Eucharistic fellowship, with relatively little concern for the preconditions for this fellowship.” Yet even this does not seem not fundamental enough. The more basic question is, What are the preconditions for baptism itself? Erickson did not answer. It is here, however, that I think Orthodox and evangelicals can find our common ground through what we may call “kerygmatic ecclesiology.”

    *Kerygmatic* ecclesiology focuses on the *preconditions for baptism* -- and all else that follows from it in the sacramental life of the church. *Kerygmatic* ecclesiology is simply the church’s proclamation of the gospel and its Spirit-enabled acceptance by all those who repent and believe. In baptism, the Eucharist and all other sacramental rites, the *kerygma* holds *a special place of primacy* in the church as the undergirding reality and primary reference point of all that is in the church. *Kerygmatic* ecclesiology is the church’s proclamation that the Good News of the Kingdom of God is here and now through the Incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and all those who repent and believe the Gospel may enter the church through Trinitarian baptism (see “The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church” ibid., pp. 74 ff. regarding “The Necessity of Baptism.” If the Orthodox generally accept the baptism of non-Orthodox Christians who are baptized in the Name of the Trinity, then evangelicals are “in Christ” which means they can be no other place than “in the church.“) The gospel is central to *all* Orthodox dogma, worship and spiritual life. This point has not received the attention it deserves in modern theological reflection. I have tried to correct this in two previous essays for those who wish to learn more. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cited by Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 13, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dr. Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Baker: Grand Rapids, MI, 2004); Brian McClaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (NY: HarperCollins, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As discussed by Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.worldea.org/news/4094/wea-rlc-research-and-analysis-report-why-russia-persecutes-non-orthodox-churches-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)