

The Imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, discipline, authority). An Onto-Theological Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper aims to contribute to debate issues of deviations from Church discipline by addressing the very foundation of ecclesiastical discipline, namely the notion of imperative, as it appears in the New Testament and Eastern Patristic Tradition, with special reference to St. Maximus the Confessor. The conclusion of the argument can be summarized as: the imperative expresses the logic of life as love.

Keywords:

imperative, law, life, gift, love, St. Maximus the Confessor

This paper aims to contribute to debate of church discipline violations, by tackling an issue which I consider a preliminary necessity of any debate, that is the basis of ecclesiastical discipline. The fact that the Church has a regulatory framework is not itself understood, as illustrated by the polemics between legalism and spiritualism that crosses Christian tradition, from its seeds in Judaism until today. Christ the Saviour was crucified on behalf of the Law (John 19:7), and its meaning was one of the main reasons for separating the various historical branches of Christianity (separation from Judaism, the split of the Western Christianity (*sola gratia*), but also a different understanding of authority in the Church between Orthodoxy and Papism). Even the Eastern tradition knows such tensions (between officio and charisma, for example).

Nowadays, a whole range of issues, that spark controversy and even disturb the unity and peace of the Church, have different ideas concerning the rule and

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The Imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, discipline, authority)

authority, for example, the calendar issue, the jurisdictions in the Diaspora, pastoral application of the sacred canons, the language of worship, the ecumenical dialogues or, more generally, the relationship between tradition and renewal.

Obviously, Christianity inherited and carries forward a nomothetic culture, expressed by a rich enough juridical vocabulary: *diathesis, logos, nomos, enthole, kanon, horos, taxis, akolouthia, pedalion* or *regula fidei, lex orandi/credendi/operandi, ordo*, etc. On the other hand, equally evident, Christianity defines itself most frequently as a culture of spirit, of forgiveness, of love.¹ The parable called of the “Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32) eloquently expresses this specificity. In it, the Saviour shows us not only how the son can exceed the failure of disobedience, but also how, to make possible the success of such an approach, the father neglects/exceeds (both at departure and at arrival) severe forms of the specific parental authority of the ancient world.

In this presentation I am concerned about the relationship between these two records, in other words between *nomos* and *agape*, as we understand it in our tradition. How can love be an order or an imperative or how the imperative may be present in a relationship of love? More suggestively: is there any imperative in the parable of the prodigal son?² Of course, the importance of this issue derives from the implications it has on various aspects of church life – such as the “disciplinary” ones, mentioned above.

Although I will not present a fairly elaborate argument, I believe that a number of passages from the Holy Scripture are sufficient to outline some of the meanings of this concept in our tradition:

¹ Fr. Rafail Noica (of Essex), *The Culture of the Spirit*, Reintregirea, Alba Iulia, 2002 (in Romanian). The most vocal contemporary orthodox exponent of this perspective is probably Christos Yannaras, and his most remarkable arguments are unfolded in *The Freedom of Morality*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1984, and *Person and Eros*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA, 2008. A useful arch over time, which proves the durability of the Christianity as love idea, is done by Oda Wischmeyer in her *Liebe als Agape: Das frühchristliche Konzept und der moderne Diskurs*, Mohr Siebeck, 2015. For the Russian theology, one can see Johannes Miroslav Oravec, *God as Love: The Concept and Spiritual Aspects of Agape in Modern Russian Religious Thought*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2014. An excellent approach from the perspective of the nomothetic pole of our issues, in Picu Ocoleanu, *The Liturgy of the Divine Commandments: Theological Prolegomena to a New Culture of the Law*, Christiana, București, 2008 (in Romanian). Not accessible to me, John Anthony McGuckin, *The Ascent of Christian Law: Patristic and Byzantine Formulations of a New Civilization*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 2012. It is appropriate to recognize how much the ideas below due to my late father, Fr Ilie Moldovan, as well as to the final work of Michel Henry, especially *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, Stanford University Press, 2003.

² The imperative - what ought to be, in contrast to the indicative – what is. Their distinction represents the most addressed issue of metaethics.

Assoc. Prof. Sebastian Moldovan

1. God is alive (Matthew 16:16; John 6:69, 2 Corinthians; see also Ezekiel; 1 Timothy; Hebrews; Revelation *passim*) and gives life (Psalms 35:10; 84:7; 142:11 - LXX; Isaiah 38:16; Nehemiah (2 Ezra) 9:6; John 5.21, 6.33, 63; Revelation 21:6).
2. Christ is life: “In him was life; and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10); “Christ, who is our life...” (Colossians 3:4); (Acts 3:15: ἀρχηγὸς τῆς ζωῆς).³
3. Life is characterized by growth (Genesis 1:28; John 10:10; Acts 6:7; 12:24).
4. The Church is living body (Ephesians 1:22-23), and the tradition is the *intra*-generational and *inter*-generational flow of life: “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, of the Word of life, – For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us– That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us.” (1 John 1:1-3; “the words of eternal life.” John 6:68; Acts 5:20; Philippians 2:16).
5. As Body of Christ, the Church has the unity and coherence of a living organism, which lives in Him: “From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” (Ephesians 4:16); “...the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God” (Colossians 2:19).

Based on this summary, we can say that God is *the only one* alive and *the only one* Who gives life. There is only a single life, of/in God, and the life of the creatures is a communion from His life, a *conviviality*/ communion with Him, received as a gift.

Given that the life of God is threefold hypostatic, we can say that life is by definition perichoretic, having as essential characteristics communion, dedication and growth. We can summarize the characteristics of the life *of/from* God through the term “abound/ overflow” (ἐγὼ ἦλθον ἵνα ζωὴν ἔχωσιν καὶ περισσὸν ἔχωσιν, John 10:10)

³ All Bible quotations are from the King James Version.

The Imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, discipline, authority)

We can answer any gift, hence the to the gift of life in three ways: 1) the gratitude and giving back (the Eucharist: “in offering to You Your own of Your own, on behalf of all and for the sake of all, ... we give thanks to You) – which closes the circuit of the gift and amplifies it; 2) the refusal (the suicide); 3) the attempt to appropriate it with no relation with the Giver (as a “own account”). Thus the gift of life can be acquired/ gained (option 1) or lost (options 2 and 3).

In an important text, St. Maximus the Confessor shows, on the one hand, that our life is a continuous Communion of God’s unique life (“any kind of life is naturally sustained by a type of food which is appropriate to it”) and, on the other hand, we have the opportunity to appropriate this life either in communion with its Giver (“the food of the blessed life is the Bread that come down from the heaven and bring life to the world”), or on our own (“the things of God, without God, and before God, and not according to God”).⁴ In the second case, what we learned in reality is not the original, authentic life, but a mortal one, in other words, a life that depletes because no longer feeds itself from the Origin or Source of life, but from the other creatures which, just like the man, do not actually have life in themselves. (Noteworthy is the understanding of death not as an absence of life, which would begin in decease, but rather as a different way of life than that of the communion with God.) We can identify a similar view of the parable of the prodigal son: the attempt to capitalize the inheritance (that is, life) separated from its source (the father), leads to an existence that exhausts itself (“he had spent all”, Luke 15:14). We will use the expression “on his/her own” to describe this failing attempt to appropriate life.

Apparently, St. Maximus contradicts himself because, in the same place, speaks simultaneously about a feature of the life of/ from God without God that “which is in any case impossible”. In fact, what cannot be is the appropriation of *life as life* without God, and what is possible is its appropriation *as death*, as a distorted way to exist. We have here, of course, the Eastern doctrine of evil, fall and sin not as simple disobedience or offense, in the legal sense, but as a diversion of the life’s powers from their goal.⁵

The reason for this “impossible”, therefore of the failure, is underlined elsewhere by St. Maximus through the idea of the existence of a specific law of Providence in this respect.⁶ Of course, we are dealing here with a law, so with an

⁴ *Ambigua*, 10.28, in Nicholas Constatas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: St. Maximus the Confessor, The Ambigua*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, vol. 28, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 140-141; I revisited the translation according to the Greek text.

⁵ See more broadly, the two definitions of evil offered by St. Maximus in the prologue to his writing *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*.

⁶ „For there is a rule and a law of Providence placed in the created things, that those who showed ungrateful for goods received, are admonished to gratitude by things contrary, having

imperative. We can simply say that the imperative represents God's will – absolute and eternal (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 1, *passim*). The perspective followed here reveals a *logic* inherent to this sovereign will: God condescends us not only to exist (bringing us into being from nothingness), but He gives us *life as life*. In this tautology, life is so independent of us, unconditional, free (nature is “created grace”) – it is *life as a gift*, but it depends on us also – it is *life as appropriation of the gift*.⁷ Or, as we have seen, we have the opportunity to appropriate life in an improper manner, as life that exhausts itself, that is mortal. In this respect, the idea of the imperative expresses the fact that God gives us the life to make it our own, but we cannot appropriate it *as life* in any manner, but *only in the own manner of life itself*, i.e. the manner of communion with Him, as *life of/ from God*.

If the mere fact of existing (Genesis 1:3 and Genesis 1:26-27) already expresses a first imperative or, more accurately, a first form/ manner of the imperative, achieving communion with the Source of life is a second manner of the imperative.

In addition to the simple idea that the imperative expresses the will of God, those discussed thus far show that the imperative expresses the gift *of life as life*: God not only constrains us to exist, but giving us His life He gives us the existence constrained by a specific requirement, that is appropriating life *as it is* in the One that gives it to us.

This second aspect or the second manner of the imperative is underlined in another well-known parable of the Saviour: the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). The parable emphasizes clearly why the master asks his servants for the talents given to them: not for his own gain (“reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed”, 25:24), but just for the gain of the servants “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance”, 25:29). The Lord requires multiplication of the talents as a prerequisite to give even more. To be noted is the fact that those who do multiply the talents, do not deserve more, but they prove themselves capable of harnessing what they receive and, as a consequence, their master may *increase* the talents – more precisely, he enjoys to do it! (“thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things”, 25:21, 23). So, this parable shows us that the multiplication imperative does not express anything else but the intention of an offer to increase. Multiplying of the talents is their *appropriation as surplus*, not as a simple storage or usage (“there thou hast that is thine”, 25:25).

to experience the contrary to know the divine power that gave them the goods”, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 52, .

⁷ The verb *to appropriate*: to make your own, to turn something into what you are yourself. Whence the noun *propriety*, ownership or characteristic feature.

The Imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, discipline, authority)

We can generalize this teaching and say that any imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, orderliness, discipline, authority) urges a gain (or avoids a loss). (From a subjective point of view, this is stated in another saying of the Saviour: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”, Matthew 6:21.) More concise, *the imperative is the indicative of gain*.

Applying the parable of the talents to the concept of life above, we understand better life’s manner of existence as something that permanently increases, an abundantly bestowal (περισσὸν, John 10:10), that we can really appropriate only in this way, that is to say in the direction of its exigency/ imperative, as pointed out very profound by the expression δοθήσεται καὶ περισσευθήσεται (Matthew 25:29). An appropriation of life in other way than in its own logic – i.e. only as preservation or exhaustion – is the biggest paradox, the paradox of sin and death.

But what does this imperative of life as life mean, what does involve this appropriation of life as growth and multiplication? Some more statements of the Saviour can help us discern this.

In Luke 6:38 (where appears “running over”, ὑπερεκχυννόμενον), it is established the principle “the same measure to be measured” (*tantum-quantum*; parallels in Matthew 7:2 and Mark 4:24). At first sight, it refers to a reward for our good deeds, what we gain as result of such deeds. Without contradicting this aspect – which can be circumscribed to the natural moral law, or the principle of reciprocity (“all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you...” Matthew 7:12), we can identify here another meaning, specific to the moral standard of the New Testament, if we put the idea of reciprocity face to face with our Lord’s teaching in Matthew 5:38-48, summed up in verse 47 through a simple question: “what do ye more?” (τί περισσὸν ποιεῖτε;). Here the Lord calls not only overcoming the law of retaliation, but even the reciprocity (5:46-47)! Although not confined to the love of enemies (compare 5:42 with 5:39-41, 44), this form of maximum love (perfect, 5:45, 48) gives us the hermeneutical key of the imperative formulated here. Generally, there are two ways in which we act in conditions of adversity: confrontation with the enemy, hoping his defeat, or capitulation, out of cowardice. But in fact, both strategies have the same motivation: fear of losing what seems important to us. The Lord urges us here to resort to a third strategy: to do *more* than the opponent constrains us, to *plus!* (5:39-41) Only what we do “more”, beyond the constraints (inevitable losses) or interests (waiver of something to gain something else), only what we do unconditionally, free, is not done any more from fear of losing (“through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”... Hebrews 2:15), but is the expression of freedom, therefore of real love.

When the Lord adds “lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth [...], but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-20) refers precisely to

what we win through this strategy, because if “in heaven” designates a reward from the Father (“which is in secret” 6:18) then this is certainly a reward in terms of life, and what is in terms of life means appropriating. In other words, in these passages, Lord teaches us that only what we give – therefore only through this “more” – becomes, inalienable, ours. From this point of view, “the same measure to be measured” does not designate only what, from a human perspective, we receive back from others (the first measure) after what we have given them something first (the second measure), but also the fact that in terms of our relationship with the Giver of life, we take from His life only *if* and only *as much* as we give to others.

To better illustrate this *tantum-quantum* principle we can use as an analogy a fountain. A fountain receives fresh water from the water table and receives *only as much* as *it is* taken out of it. If from it the water is not removed, the flow of water from the water table to the well stops and the fine channels from the earth, through which the fountain is supplied, clog, and the well becomes practically a puddle or even dry.⁸

Therefore, we cannot appropriate life of/from God unless we appropriate it as life, i.e. by increasing/ multiplying it through giving.

This imperative, this logic of life appears even in the person of the Saviour Who fills with His life as God His humanity just by giving Himself in sacrifice. If within the logic of mortal life, survival involves its preserving in the integrity of the body closed in its biological limits, within the logic of the new life, appropriation of life is acquired only through the “brake” of the body and the “shed” of the blood, that is of life, towards life communion with the others (ἐκχυννόμενον, Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; cf. Luke 22:20).

Since the highest form of devotion is unconditional love (John 13:1), carried to self-sacrifice (John 15:13), we may conclude that the law or logic of life, which is the growth and multiplication, is identical with love. A similar statement made St. Nicholas Cabasilas in his famous writing “Life in Christ”: “what could be more appropriate to call life than love?”⁹

Therefore, to summarize everything we have obtained from the above discussion, in the theological perspective, what we call imperative expresses/ indicates the logic of *life as love*.

This understanding of the imperative has some important implications for our discussion.

⁸ This principle can be identified in the meeting of our Saviour with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well; Of course, the fountain is the woman, and the water table is the Lord (John 4:5-26; cf. John 7:38).

⁹ *De vita in Christo*, Migne, PG 150,725CD.

The Imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, discipline, authority)

1. Everything that happens in the Church all its life takes place within this logic: “But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love..” (Ephesians 4:15-16; noteworthy, growth and edification take place through love: τὴν αὐξησιν τοῦ σώματος ποιεῖται εἰς οἰκοδομὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ). Or “let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works” (εἰς παροξυσμὸν ἀγάπης καὶ καλῶν ἔργων, Hebrews 10:24).
2. The entire system of norms of the Church – the commandments of the Old Law as well as those of the New Law – expresses this imperative and only this one. “See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; In that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply...” (Deuteronomy 30:15-16). “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love. [...] This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you..” (John 15,10,12)
3. The purpose of the imperative and the rules which express it is one alone: appropriating life as life, by appropriating that mode of action (thinking, affective mood, behavior) that we call love.¹⁰
4. This view is also confirmed by what we call canonical discipline or the law of the Church. The holy canons are “of Him [God]” (τῶν κανονικῶν αὐτοῦ διαταξέων, The Seventh Ecumenical Synod, canon 5) and aim “the healing of souls and curing of passions” (πρὸς ψυχῶν θεραπείαν καὶ ἰατρειαν παθῶν, Trullo, canon 2). The pedagogical and the therapeutic

¹⁰ St. Maximus the Confessor: “For each of these laws [the natural, the written and the one of the grace, *author’s note*] has a peculiar mode of life and appropriate course of action since each generate a different disposition of the will for those who follow it” (*Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 64, trans. in Paul M. Blowers, and Robert Louis Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, RSM Press, 2003, p. 167). “The whole purpose of the Saviour’s commandments is to free the mind from incontinence and hate and to bring it to the love of Him and of one’s neighbour...” (*Capita de caritate*, IV.56, trans. in George C. Berthold, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, 1985, pp. 81); “God who has promised you everlasting happiness and placed in your heart the pledge of the Spirit has enjoined you tend to you behaviour so that the inner man, freed from the passions, might begin here and now to enjoy this happiness.” (*ibidem*, IV.78, p. 84; see also I.61,79).

language abound in the canons, as we see especially in the canons 102 from Trullo (see also 2; 41; 96) or in the pastoral letter of St. Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the canons 31 Apostolic, 8 Ephesus, I-II Constantinople 3, as those of St. Basil the Great (2; 3; 27; 29; 38; 74; 90). For example, canon 96 from Trullo states that “we shall treat them paternally, with an appropriate penalty, educating them and teaching them to live prudently” (επιτιμῶ προσφορῶ πατρικῶς θεραπευομέν...). It is worth reproducing here a passage from the introduction to the canonical collection called *The Synagogue in 50 Titles* attributed to the patriarch John of Constantinople (Scholasticus): “These men [disciples and apostles or their successors] did not think that they ought, as the civil laws do, to harm wrongdoers (for this seemed altogether simple-minded and very negligent), but instead were zealous to brave dangers most readily for their flock and to turn aright those who were going astray. Like the Good Shepherd, they hastened without hesitation after any who were wandering or veering from the straight path, and they struggled to draw up by all manner of means those who have already fallen headlong into the pit. With great wisdom and skill they cut off with the knife of the Spirit that which was already putrid and far gone, while that which was only damaged and weakened they bound with various soft medicines and rational dressings. Thus, by the grace and coworking of the Spirit they restored to their first health those who were ill.”¹¹

So the goal of the penitential discipline of the Church and the whole system of ecclesial and pastoral rules, is appropriating, promoting and healing of life by proper functioning or restoring ability to love. When fails to do so, any member of the Church, community and individual, regardless of his position, is in deviation.¹²

Let us add only that the contemporary research of the wellbeing of people fully confirms the purpose of love in our lives. A research conducted at Harvard entitled “The Study of Adult Development”, has followed longitudinally the lives of more than 800 people over more than 60 years (1938-2009), to discover

¹¹ V. Benešević, *Sinagoga v 50 titulov i drugie juridičeskie sborniki Ioanna Scholastika*, St. Petersburg 1914, reed. Leipzig 1972, trans. in David Wagschal, *Law and Legality in the Greek East: The Byzantine Canonical Tradition, 381-883*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 293.

¹² It is worth mentioning here the still valuable comparative study of Hilarion Troitsky (future archbishop and now venerated as a martyr) titled “Pokaianie v Tservki i pokaianie v katolices-tve” (1913), now in Sviascenomucenik Ilarion, arhiepiskop Vereiskii, *Bez Tservki net Spasenia*, Izdatel'stvo Znamenie, Moskva-Sankt Petersburg, 2000.

The Imperative (rule, regulation, commandment, order, discipline, authority)

which factors contribute to a satisfactory aging. The results were summarized as follows: “The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.” “Happiness equals love—full stop.”¹³

Translated into English by Monica Cojocarescu

¹³ George E. Vaillant, *Triumphs of Experience. The Men of the Harvard Grant Study*, Harvard University Press, 2012; for a short summary provided by the author, see <http://www.duodecim.fi/xmedia/duo/pilli/duo99210x.pdf>.