

Economia in the Orthodox tradition

In the Eastern Orthodox and in the teaching of the Church Fathers which undergirds the theology of those Churches, **economy** or **oeconomy** (Greek: **οικονόμια**, *oikonomia*) has several meanings.⁽¹⁾ The basic meaning of the word is "handling" or "disposition" or "management" of a thing, usually assuming or implying *good* or *prudent* handling (as opposed to *poor* handling) of the matter at hand.

As such, the word "oikonomia", and the concept attaching to it, are utilized especially with regard to two types of "handling": (a) *divine oikonomia*, that is, God's "handling" or "management" of the fallen state of the world and of mankind — the arrangements he made in order to bring about man's salvation after the fall; and (b) what might be termed *pastoral oikonomia* (or *ecclesiastical oikonomia*, that is, the Church's "handling" or "management" of various pastoral and disciplinary questions, problems, and issues that have arisen through the centuries of Church history.

Referring to the *ecclesiastical oikonomia*:

In one sense, it refers to the discretionary power given to the Church by Christ himself, in order to manage and govern the Church. Christ referred to this when he gave the Apostles the authority to "bind and to loose" (Matthew 16:19, 18:18), and this authority in turn was transmitted to the bishops who came after the Apostles.

In this sense "oikonomia" means, as already noted, "handling", "management", "disposition". In general then, "oikonomia" refers to pastoral handling or discretion or management in a neutral sense.

But it also can take two specific forms: it can be "exact" ("precise", "strict"), which means the usual or general rule is followed precisely; or it can be "lenient" (a loosening or modification of that usual or general rule). The former is called "oikonomia according to strictness (exactness)" and the latter, "oikonomia according to leniency." Oikonomia according to leniency — a modification in the application of the usual rule — has always been done when, in the judgment of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 15:28, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us") this would result in the wider salvation of souls through the extension of God's mercy.

In later usage of the terms, "oikonomia" came to be used as a synonym for "oikonomia according to leniency" — that is, a deviation from the exactness of the usual rule — often involving a practice that indeed appears more "lenient." At the same time, the newer terminology speaks simply of "exactness" (or "strictness") instead of "oikonomia according to exactness (strictness)". Thus in this more recent use of terms, the dichotomy "oikonomia according to leniency" vs. "oikonomia according to exactness (strictness, preciseness)," is replaced by "oikonomia" versus "strictness" ("exactness", "preciseness"). The norm, the normal case, is called **akribeia** (preciseness, exactness, strictness, that is, precise or strict adherence to the standards), while its opposite is **economia** (*leniency*).

It is important to observe that when oikonomia is correctly used and applied (that is, as a modification in the application of the usual rule) such correct application of oikonomia itself is

one of the rules. Thus, if one speaks of "bending", "suspending", "dispensing with", "relaxing" the usual rule, one should bear in mind that such descriptions could be misleading, since the correct use of economy is always done in accordance with the rule of Christ, and never contrary to it. This brings up the general principle that in the Church all canons and laws exist in subjection to the rule of Christ — that is to say, His commandments, teachings, and precepts.

Economia is, therefore, in one sense, a bishop's discretionary power to dispense with the ordinary church discipline, or the strict application of the ordinary rules or "canons", of the Church, as they are called.⁽²⁾ This is because, while the canons are laws (rules) that govern the Church, their provisions do not always precisely cover every situation that might come up; thus their application may at times need to be modified. Such dispensations are made with a view towards putting the spirit before the letter and helping the cause of the salvation of souls.

In this understanding, Orthodox Church *economia* is the suspension of the absolute and strict applications of canon and church regulations in the governing and the life of the Church, without subsequently compromising the dogmatic limitations. The application of *economia* only takes place through the official church authorities and is only applicable for a particular case.

The Eastern Orthodox Church intends this concept to have the result that Love, Mercy, and Compassion remain more in control than absolute law.

Stefan-Ioan Stratul

Romanian Orthodox church – March 2009

1. Lampe, et al, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1968) 940–943
2. Broderick, Robert (editor) (1987). *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers., p. 433