│ CHAPTER 9 │

Child Safeguarding Policies in
the Serbian Orthodox Church

Rastko JOVIĆ

ABSTRACT

In the face of recent shifts in perspective, this paper explores the general stance of Orthodox Christianity towards human rights. Although Orthodox theology has been perceived as unsupportive of human rights, recent theologians have shown more positive engagement, signalling a shift in the Church's stance. This text tries to distil the theological importance given to children in the life of the early Church, while considering the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church — which is attempting to align itself with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The paper also discusses critical documents reflecting the Church's perspective on human rights, acknowledging convergence with Church teachings, and addressing areas for improvement. Documents issued by some Orthodox churches – dealing with issues of human rights and the rights of children – explicitly stressed the significance of safeguarding children's rights while simultaneously stressing the rights and dignity of the family. The dialectic expressed within these documents safeguards the balance between children's rights and family dignity. The paper also emphasises the relevance of the family as the foundation of society, where members are willing to make sacrifices for one another, crucial for political and ethical intersections. The destruction of the family could lead to the separation of people from any form of collective identity, exposing society to forces that could ultimately empty individuals of their selves, leaving children with no more authentic identity that can be protected.

KEYWORDS

children, Human Rights, Orthodox Church, family, theology, baptism

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, a pervasive argument has suggested an incompatibility between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and universal human rights norms. This notion has been reiterated so often that many widely embrace it as factual. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child signifies a milestone in the ongoing advancement of human rights: towards the end of 1989 it was ratified by the UN General Assembly, marking a historic moment where children were granted distinct rights for the first time: survival, development, protection, and participation. While

there is a prevailing notion that Orthodox Christianity does not support human rights — an assertion that does not hold true, especially considering numerous theologians in the past two decades who have expressed more positive views on the matter — it is evident that Orthodox theology engages with human rights by offering a more profound critique rather than outright rejection. This paper aims to present a theological affirmation concerning the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Simultaneously, it will highlight significant documents indicating the evolving stance of the Orthodox Church, which has been shifting toward acceptance of human rights despite encountering new challenges. This transition is notably evident in the preparations for the Holy Council at Crete in 2016, where both preparatory and final documents endorsed the idea of compatibility between Orthodox theology and human rights.

2. Ambivalence and Theology

Considering the widely accepted idea that human rights are deeply intertwined with the concepts of modernity and the Enlightenment, it is easier to understand the unease of the Orthodox towards this question. For various reasons the Orthodox world has not fully integrated into modernity's evolution. It missed pivotal periods like the Renaissance, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, religious conflicts, the Enlightenment, the French and industrial revolutions, the rise of individual rights, and the establishment of secular nation-states. What modernity recognises as fundamental seems somewhat distant from Orthodoxy, leading to challenges in interacting with the contemporary (post-)modern world.[1] The idea that Eastern Orthodox Christianity is incompatible with the norms of universal human rights has been argued so frequently in the past two decades that it has become accepted by many as a fact.[2] Orthodox churches living in a global culture have, in principle, embraced democracy and human rights. They are struggling, however, to cope with the implications of living in a democratic and free society.[3] Orthodox theologians and hierarchs have expressed diverse and, in many instances, contradictory views about this matter.[4] For many Orthodox theologians, the primary struggle has revolved around the perceived conflict and a somewhat resistant stance between the significance of Liturgy and the Church's eschatological focus, juxtaposed against modern concepts like human rights and individualism. In theological discourse, Orthodox theologians have often hesitated to interconnect the practical aspects of Church life and society with the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God represented in the Liturgy. However, emphasising this inseparable connection reveals that due to the essence of Orthodox Liturgy and its eschatological orientation, the Church cannot justify social

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1 Kalaitzidis, 2018, pp. 273–274.
2 Marsh and Payne, 2012, p. 201.
3 Clapsis, 2016, p. 113.
4 Papanikolaou, 2012, pp. 88–98.

indifference or passivity in the face of injustice, violence, and oppression.[5] In other words, human rights should not be isolated from humanity's inherent connection to God. Embracing human rights should stem from the belief in humanity's divine origins (*Imago Dei*), its ongoing reliance on God, and its ultimate realisation in God's Kingdom. Humanity's inherent dignity and unity find their foundation in acknowledging God's encompassing love within all aspects of life, the 'One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4:6).[6]

Many Orthodox theologians naturally positioned themselves against the "individual rights" prevalent in the individualistic, secularised West, advocating instead for the "communal rights" in the Orthodox communitarian East. From this standpoint, subjectivity and individualism were seen as significant barriers to Orthodox acceptance of human rights and the convergence of Orthodoxy with modernity and the Enlightenment tradition.[7] Nevertheless, our aim is not merely to complicate this intricate relationship between modernity and Orthodoxy. Instead, we aspire to demonstrate that the Orthodox tradition embodies the intrinsic value of human beings. This concept has long been linked to children's welfare, even in its early stages. By delving into the ontological concepts embedded in our tradition, we intend to illustrate the interconnectedness between the dignity of children and the imperative to safeguard it, rooted in the eschatological anticipation of a transformed world. Already in the Orthodox teaching of the Trinity, we recognise the distinct uniqueness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, simultaneously affirming 'their perichoresis, mutual co-inherence and the fullness of their divinity. All human beings – despite their apparent cultural, national, racial and religious differences – are endowed with an inherent dignity reflecting their qualitative relationship with God being created in His image.'[8] After the Councils in the early Church, which fought against Christological heresies, it was brought to the European mind the understanding that personhood was vested with divine potency.[9] This became apparent, especially in the case of the Divine personhood of Christ that has been incarnated. In its early stages, Christianity aimed to introduce a radically new community where every individual, including children, was acknowledged and valued. By delving into these early historical instances, we can better understand the message Early Christianity sought to convey. Fr. Georges Florovsky characteristically remarks concerning the early Church,

> 'Christianity from the beginning existed as a corporate reality, as a community. To be Christian meant just to belong to the community. Nobody could be Christian by himself, as an isolated individual, but only together with 'the brethren', in a "togetherness" with them. Unus Christianus nullus Christianus [one Christian – no Christian]. Personal conviction or even a rule of life still

5 Clapsis, 2016, p. 125.
6 Ibid.
7 Kalaitzidis, 2018, p. 283.
8 Clapsis, 2016, p. 126.
9 Kalaitzidis, 2018, p. 287.

The Jewish family structure was characterised as patriarchal, known as the "Bet Av," translating to the "house of the father."[13] In the Old Testament, forming a family equated to establishing a household (Deuteronomy 25: 9–10). The family held both religious and social significance (Exodus 12: 3; 1 Sam 20: 6; Job 1: 5). The father functioned as the household's head and primary authority (Num 26: 54–55; Gen 50: 16; Jer 35: 6–10; Prov. 6: 20). However, there was an expectation for him to display love and compassion, and to bestow blessings upon his family (Gen 25: 28; 37: 4; 44: 20; Ps 103: 13; Gen 27). Children were regarded as a special blessing from God, and if a woman could not bear children, it was customary for the man to take a concubine or a woman of equal status.[14] The primary focus revolved around the support and prosperity of the household. Even individual members within the household held less significance compared to its overarching prosperity.

Within the Greek household, we notice a similar pattern concerning the borders that differentiated its members. That was especially evident for women. On the one hand, there was a wave of emancipation from Rome and a struggle to preserve old Greek values. The main characteristic of this struggle was the question of the position of women in the house. 'While women were experiencing increasing actual power and independence within marriage and without, they were still expected to behave as the relatively powerless wives of classical Athens, practically as if they were their husband's slaves.'[15] The position of women was full of ambivalence. Their reproductive capacity put them in the centre of the household, yet they were marginalised in both a social and political sense.

Within the Roman social framework, the family operated under the authority of the *paterfamilias*, wielding the power known as *patria potestas* over family members.[16] His authority was absolute, granting him the power of life and death over those within his household.[17] However, as the first century A.D. unfolded, the dominance of the paterfamilias began to wane.[18] The term "familia" derives from "famulus", meaning "servant", indicating a sense of ownership or control.[19] Moreover, the most common word for child in both Greek and Latin, παῖς/puer, could also denote "slave".[20] During the early Christian Era, the Roman family wielded considerable influence on society, serving as both an ideal and a metaphor.[21] It functioned as a strictly hierarchical system where a man's *potestas* curtailed the freedom of both men and women under his authority.[22]

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13 Skolnik and Berenbaum, 2007, p. 1166.
14 Ibid., p. 1169.
15 Verner, 1981, p. 97.
16 Lassen, 1997, p. 104.
17 Ibid., p. 105.
18 Verner, 1981, p. 119.
19 Boswell, 1995, p. 40.
20 Ibid.
21 Lassen, 1997, p. 112.
22 Ibid.

However, during the first century A.D. the Roman household exhibited a surprising level of inclusivity, challenging prior conceptions of family dynamics. The hierarchical model of the household persisted, emphasising the importance of a well-ordered house for societal advancement and prestige. It has become apparent that the metaphorical houses referenced by the early Church did not symbolise equality but instead stood for "houses of inclusion".[23]

Why emphasise the distinct traits of Greek and Jewish households? We have aimed to illustrate the differences perpetuated by the Church within its assemblies: while household members were segregated in their daily tasks for the household's prosperity, communal prayer summoned them together for an eschatological prosperity surpassing the household's boundaries. The stark segregation evident in private homes becomes noteworthy at this juncture. The inclusive nature of Christian gatherings might have been a source of scandal in the Greco-Roman world. Minucius Felix, in his depiction of Christians, observes: 'On a special day they gather in a feast with all their children, sisters, mothers – all sexes and all ages' (Octavius 9.5–6).[24] It is significant to note that Minucius Felix specifically highlights children, elevating their importance.

2.2. Children and the Early Church

We aimed to elucidate the hierarchical structure within ancient households, particularly acknowledging the societal invisibility of children. In the Gospels, we observe a distinct role assigned to children by Christ (Matthew 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). Additionally, in the narrative of the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–15), a child offers his small lunch of fish and bread (John 6:9), which Jesus miraculously multiplies to feed the multitude. Moreover, during Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:14–16), children praise Jesus within the temple, causing consternation among religious leaders.

> 'The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read," "From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise?" Matthew 21:14–16'

Children played a significant role in the salvation of humanity and in Christ's proclamation. 'And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"' (Matthew 18:3). While previously overlooked within the family and household dynamics, Christianity now

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23 Elliott, 2003, p. 195.
24 Wilken, 2003, p. 19.

places a deliberate focus on their unique identity, emphasising its crucial role in the salvation of humanity. This underscores the eschatological value attributed to the virtues exemplified by children (Matthew 18:3). Children have transitioned from having undifferentiated identities to possessing distinct values within the new family structure – the Church. The emergence of their identity holds particular significance, a birth brought forth by Christianity. Later in his missionary journeys, the Apostle Paul mirrored Christ's miraculous deeds, including instances where Jesus resurrected children (Matthew 9:18, 23–26; Mark 5:22–24, 35–43; Luke 8:41–42, 49–56; Luke 7:11–17).

> 'Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted (Acts 20:7–12).'

In subsequent New Testament accounts, such as the Epistle of Ephesians, children are depicted as having a direct relationship with Christ, emphasising their significance. Previous letters also caution against the misuse of paternal authority regarding children.[25] In the Pastoral Epistles within the New Testament, we must not overlook that they have specific roles which again emphasise their identity. For example, when they reach adulthood, they should take care of their parents or grandparents (1 Timothy 5:4). Leaders of the Church are urged to have faithful children (Titus 1:6), which shows the Church's concern for the general stability of the society in which the head of the household determines the religion of the whole of the household.[26]

Paul's use of family imagery[27] aimed to transcend the rigid hierarchical model within his churches. By establishing Christ as *Kyrios* and himself as the apostle, Paul redefined authority, shifting the locus of power away from the traditional paterfamilias concept. In Paul's community, God became the ultimate paterfamilias, with authority channelled through an external source — Paul — while the community became an extended family.[28] This portrayal positioned the Church as a new familial structure where every member, irrespective of societal standing, played a visible role. It emphasised the community as a family of brothers, sisters, children, and enslaved people, collectively integral to the whole.

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25 Lincoln and Wedderburn, 2010, p. 141.
26 MacDonald, 2004, p. 212.
27 Family images in Corinthians: 1 Cor 3, 1–3; 1Cor 4, 14–21; 2 Cor 6, 11–13; 2 Cor 12, 14–15.
28 Joubert, 1995, p. 212.

For Paul, it was important to embrace the potentiality of the household structures that could evolve into a Church – into a new community that abandons old mentalities. The Church perceived itself as a family – transcending biological constraints. The Church, an image of the Kingdom of God, assumed responsibility for this new family, safeguarding its eternal salvation. This contrasted with nuclear families, which might overlook children's place and life within the Church. Thus, Paul emphasised the concept of fictive kinship to emphasise the interconnectedness and responsibility within this new familial paradigm.

2.3. Inherent Potency of the Human Being

During the initial phases of Christianity, we briefly observed the transformation of children from unseen and less valued entities into distinct and meaningful individuals. Christianity, in a way, nurtured their individuality, which biological birth within Greek, Roman, or Jewish households did not inherently provide. The Church's early emphasis on this idea persisted through the intentional focus on baptism. Baptism was intended to validate children uniquely, bestowing upon them an eternal identity. It served as a witness to parents, the entire household, and society that these young individuals held eternal worth in the eyes of God.

Baptism held a pivotal role for individuals seeking inclusion in the Christian community. This sacrament not only influenced the perspective of the newly baptised individual but also shaped the collective worldview of the entire Church community. It was more than a theological ritual; it served as a communal and pedagogical experience. Through baptism, a significant message was conveyed to the Christian gatherings: that children possess eternal and distinctive value, regardless of their lifespan, whether brief or long-lived, affirming their intrinsic worth.

Since very early on, the Church has been baptising children. While unverifiable, we can find many testimonies that prove that the higher mortality rate of newborn children pushed the Church to perform the baptism early on.[29] The question at stake was the issue of eternal salvation and the seal that proves the potency of each human being baptised in Christ, being incorporated into Divine Personality. Also, in the New Testament, we have testimonies that the Apostle Paul baptised the whole household in several instances.[30] In the Scriptures, several families are mentioned in connection with baptism: thus, we find information that the Apostle Peter baptised Cornelius (Acts 10); then that Lydia and "her household" received baptism (Acts 16:15); the jailer and "all his household" (Acts 16:33); the synagogue leader Crispus and his household (Acts 18:8); as well as the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). It would be hard to imagine that there was no child[31] in any of these households;[32] however, it would also be groundless to assert that there were infants there categorically.[33] That

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29 Kulman, 2011, pp. 23–48.
30 Jović, 2018, pp. 477–484.
31 Kulman, 2011, p. 47.
32 Mutavdžić, 2016, pp. 313–340.
33 Afanasjev, 2008, pp. 135–171.

can be the point at stake which proves children's participation[34] in this event of the new eschatological reality.[35] Baptism was not perceived as violent, but was primarily regarded as a voluntary embrace of the Spirit, implying an intended acceptance of faith throughout life.[36] On one hand, the Church aimed to preserve its mission and concern for eschatological salvation. On the other hand, it had the obligation to fulfil the condition of freedom[37] so that no one would be baptised by coercion.[38] Gregory of Nazianzus thus suggests that children should be baptised at the age of three so they would be aware.[39]

At the inaugural apostolic council in 49 A.D. baptism replaced circumcision, with the latter ultimately abandoned. With circumcision no longer a mandatory visible marker of belonging to God's people, pagans found it more accessible to integrate religiously and socially into Christianity.

'Entering the Church through Baptism and anointment advanced the essential sanctification of the subjectivity. A human being stands alone in front of the cosmos, born in Christ. A newly baptised person no longer loves their family for the reason of biological dependence, but because they become aware of the Christian imperative to "consciously" and "critically" love and value them. In other words, a human person can say, "I don't like my family for the reason of biology, because that's how I have to do – unconsciously. Suddenly, I love because I am conscious of my identity, my role, and my being in the context of salvation – I am becoming aware of my subjectivity."'[40]

3. Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church

Baptism served to reaffirm the individual personhood of the child, imbuing it with eschatological value. In essence, baptising the child was linked to reinforcing this genuinely new identity. The event held immense importance for Christian parents, serving as a way to highlight to the larger community how their Christian faith transformed the perspectives within their household and the surrounding culture. Therefore, baptism was not merely a religious ritual: it represented the birth of a new worldview and an alternative cultural perspective.[41] The Church established canons that upheld and reinforced this concept to sustain the idea of an eternal family

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34 Afanasjev, 2008, pp. 135–154.
35 Jović, 2021, pp. 165–172.
36 Afanasjev, 2008, p. 134.
37 Jović, 2018, pp. 55–98.
38 Afanasjev, 2008, p. 139.
39 Ibid., p. 137.
40 Jović, 2021, p. 171.
41 Jović, 2015, pp. 67–82.

introduced to newborns. Canon 110 from the Council of Carthage (4th/5th century) already implied that small children must be baptised.[42] According to Canon 37 of John the Faster, parents whose child dies without baptism are subject to a three-year separation from the Church.[43] Saint Nikifor the Confessor, in Canon 38, mentions that in case of a child's life-threatening danger, they should be baptised as soon as possible.[44] Thus, the 84th canon of the Council in Trullo and the 72nd canon of the Council of Carthage[45] specify that children for whom there is a doubt whether they have been baptised, should be baptised, since the Church has not performed the public reception of these children. The public nature of baptism guaranteed the public display of the new values that Christianity has proclaimed. For these reasons, the Canon from Trullo 59 strictly forbids baptism in private homes, 'Let no Baptism be performed for anyone that is in an oratory within a house at the time; but let those who are going to be deemed worthy of the undefiled illumination come to the Orthodox Catholic Churches and there enjoy this gift.'[46] The sixth canon of the Council of Neo-Caesarea holds particular significance in this context. It states,

> 'As concerning a woman who is pregnant, we decree that she ought to be illuminated whenever she so wishes. For in this case there is no intercommunion of the woman with the child, owing to the fact that every person possesses a will of his own which is shown in connection with his confession of faith.'[47]

In the explanatory part of this canon, the Rudder says,

> '…the present canon decrees that a pregnant woman who is a catechumen may be baptised whenever she wishes, since she does not impart the illumination and baptism to the embryo in her womb, but, on the contrary, she alone is baptised. For in confessing that one is joining forces with Christ and renouncing the Devil, in baptism, and, speaking in general, whenever one gets baptised, he needs to show his own will, either through himself directly, as in the case of persons being baptised at an age when they are capable of rational speech, such as is that of this pregnant mother-to-be, or by means of a sponsor, as in the case of persons being baptised in their infancy, but an embryo in the belly cannot show this will either through itself, not yet having developed a will of its own, nor through a sponsor, since it has not yet been born nor is it capable of being baptised.'[48]

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42 Jevtić, 2005, pp. 376 and 377.
43 Ibid., p. 569.
44 Ibid., p. 577.
45 Ibid., p. 353.
46 Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Agapius the Monk 2005, p. 738.
47 Ibid., p. 1048.
48 Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Agapius the Monk, 2005, p. 1049.

The present canon tries to safeguard the will of the mother and the baby in her womb, considering them to represent two different personalities. In both cases, faith is expressed in respecting the will of both. So, the mother alone cannot baptise the child in her womb, but this needs to be done in a way that the will of the baby is protected by some means. In this case, the interpreter of the canon explains that the sponsor is the one to testify instead of the child while it grows up. 'In this way, it is indicated that the newborn, even before birth, was perceived and accepted by the Church as a special and unique person, just like his mother, who is allowed to receive baptism during pregnancy freely.'[49]

In the same line goes the canon of Basil the Great, which prohibits abortion: in other words, his second canon expresses the ontological care for humanity in which the unborn child deserves the sanctity of life. The canon says, 'For here there is involved the question of providing justice for the infant to be born, but also for the woman who has plotted against her own self. For in most cases, the women die in the course of such operations.'[50] Though crafted over seventeen centuries ago, these canons embody an anthropological and legal perspective that would later mature within legal frameworks, becoming a hallmark of contemporary societies 'in which the unborn child is considered the bearer of legal subjectivity and a certain form of ecclesial identity.'[51]

Additionally, the Church embraced canons like the 35th canon of the Council of Carthage, safeguarding the position of children within the family structure. These canons affirmed the parental guardianship and spiritual responsibility toward children. Similarly, the 15th and 16th canons of the Synod of Gangra emphasised the reciprocal obligations between parents and children. They highlighted the family's role as a fundamental, natural environment — an ideal and nurturing spiritual context for the proper development of children, encompassing their biological, psychological, and spiritual aspects. Moreover, the Church condemned the exposure of children to physical and psychological harm, denouncing such acts of elder wrongdoing against children in canons 32 through 39 of St. John the Faster (Nesteutes).[52] As the *Rules and Procedure for Ecclesiastical Courts* of the Serbian Orthodox Church outlines, a priest's refusal to perform baptism[53] might lead to punitive measures (§30).[54] Before the baptism takes place, it is essential to note that within the Orthodox tradition, the very occurrence of a child's conception is Liturgically celebrated. For example,

> 'In the typikon of Hagia Sophia in the tenth century, the feast of the conception of the Baptist is still called "New Year," and marked the beginning

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49 Devrnja, 2022, p. 116.
50 Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Agapius the Monk, 2005, p. 1454.
51 Devrnja, 2022, p. 116.
52 Ibid., pp. 116–117.
53 Zbornik Pravila, Uredaba i Naredaba Arhijerejskog Sabora Pravoslavne Srpske Crkve u Kraljevini Srbiji (Od 1839–1900 Godine), 1900, p. 37.
54 Ibid., p. 205.

of the course reading of the gospel of Luke, although the beginning of the civil year had been shifted to the beginning of September in the fifth century.'[55]

Therefore, the logic beneath all the mentioned canons and regulations within the Serbian Orthodox Church highlights baptism as a pivotal moment that confirms the inherent power bestowed upon a child since conception. Through this sacrament, the baptised child becomes a member of a new family — the Church community. This provision aimed to ensure this alternative beginning, offering a new familial connection should unfortunate circumstances arise within the biological family.

3.1. Freedom and Baptism

We have tried to stress that baptism not only gave rise to a new and distinct identity for children but also brought them into the new family kinship, which safeguarded the eternal destiny of newborn members. The Church perceived itself as a family, a control mechanism when the nuclear family unit failed in its role. In his renowned *Letter 98*, Augustine of Hippo affirms the baptism of children, illustrating how the Church becomes a new family for those welcomed into its embrace. At the same time, this letter draws an image showing the cultural and moral novelty brought by Christianity in treating children.

'...whereas you see that many are not presented by parents, but also by any strangers whatever, as sometimes the infant children of slaves are presented by their masters. Sometimes also, when their parents are deceased, little orphans are baptised, being presented by those who had it in their power to manifest their compassion in this way. Again, sometimes foundlings which heartless parents have exposed in order to their being cared for by any passer-by, are picked up by holy virgins, and are presented for baptism by these persons, who neither have nor desire to have children of their own: and in this you behold precisely what was done in the case mentioned in the Gospel of the man wounded by thieves, and left half dead on the way, regarding whom the Lord asked who was neighbour to him, and received for answer: He that showed mercy on him... Nevertheless, persons of more advanced fears, whether they be parents bringing their children, or others bringing any little ones, who attempt to place those who have been baptised under obligation to profane worship of heathen gods, are guilty of spiritual homicide. True, they do not actually kill the children's souls, but they go as far towards killing them as is in their power. The warning, Do not kill your little ones, may be with all propriety addressed to them; for the apostle says, Quench not the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19), not that He can be quenched,

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55 Talley, 1986, p. 96.

but that those who so act as if they wished to have Him quenched are deservedly spoken of as quenchers of the Spirit... The presentation of the little ones to receive the spiritual grace is the act not so much of those by whose hands they are borne up (although it is theirs also in part, if they themselves are good believers) as of the whole society of saints and believers. For it is proper to regard the infants as presented by all who take pleasure in their baptism, and through whose holy and perfectly-united love they are assisted in receiving the communion of the Holy Spirit. Therefore this is done by the whole mother Church, which is in the saints, because the whole Church is the parent of all the saints, and the whole Church is the parent of each one of them.'[56]

During the socialist era, the Church succeeded in baptising children from predominantly communist families through grandmothers, grandfathers, godmothers, godfathers, uncles, aunts, and others from extended families. For example, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last ruler of the USSR, was baptised by his grandfather.[57] Therefore, with the decline in the nuclear family's accountability toward children and their fundamental destiny, there emerged a need for cooperation between the Church and the extended family to safeguard the child's eschatological life and destiny. This extended family structure mirrors the characteristics of ancient households illustrated here. This notion's continuity became evident during the era of socialism. During the socialist era, as religious guidance for children encountered limitations, the Church sought to display its concern—both eschatological and soteriological—for the well-being of individuals. This concern materialised through baptism, becoming the only contribution the Church could provide—a glimpse of future life—when it could not offer any other form of care to families and children aside from the foundational essence of the rite of baptism rooted in eschatology.

Baptism has aimed to display the Church's concern to accentuate the uniqueness and irreplaceability of each human being. When reduced merely to a tradition, baptism faces a threat to its core significance. Baptism's role signifies a potential alignment between children's rights and Orthodox theology. The importance of baptism has laid theoretical ground that safeguards children's unique role and eternal value. The Church could not perceive the baptism as coercion upon children since entering it is only viable through faith, and remaining within it relies solely on faith. In other words, baptism serves as a commitment to a Christian life rather than an absolute event that rigidly shapes someone's fate, which would be an intrusion into someone's freedom. The issue for the Orthodox Church here is to responsibly put this theoretical framework into practice.

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56 Hippo, 1887, p. 749.
57 Gorbachev, 1996, p. 20.

4. Convention on the Rights of the Child

In discussing this, we might attempt to better understand the Church's possible approach and connection to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. What is the essence of the Church's message, the Gospel? It is the promise of eternal life, and the commitment to family duty and service: the Church is a family of believers. Although some display pessimism concerning the possibility of dialogue between the Orthodox Church and human rights in general, we need to mention three critical documents that laid a more optimistic and promising view. An essential document is from the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held at Crete in 2016. Within the document, *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World*, the Orthodox Church expressed an important message:

> 'The Church, in the Spirit of respecting human rights and equal treatment of all, values the application of these principles in the light of her teaching on the sacraments, the family, the role of both genders in the Church, and the overall principles of Church tradition. The Church has the right to proclaim and witness to her teaching in the public sphere.'[58]

In 2008, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) issued its own document concerning the issue of human rights, 'The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity Freedom and Rights.'[59] Among commentators on human rights and the Orthodox Church, this document remains a significant target for criticism. Given its lack of status as an Orthodox conciliar document, its constructive critique and gradual enhancement could contribute meaningfully to discussions on Orthodox theology and human rights.[60] Within the document, a notable conclusion emerges, emphasising the areas where human rights align with the Church's teachings while highlighting where improvements are necessary for the ROC's acceptance. It is evident that the ROC emphasises both freedom of religion and the expression of faith alongside the safeguarding of the traditional family structure:

> 'Today just as before, we are called to show concern, not only in word but also in deed, for the protection of human rights and dignity. At the same time, we are aware that human rights are often violated in the modern world and human dignity is trampled down not only by the state authorities but also transnational structures, economic actors, pseudo-religious groups, terrorist and other criminal communities. More and more often, human

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58 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World', 2016.
59 'Osnovy ucheniya Russkoy pravoslavnoy tserkvi o dostoinstve svobode i pravakh cheloveka (2008)'.
60 Grdzelidze, 2018, p. 312.

rights and dignity have to be defended against the destructive aggression of the media. The following areas are singled out for our human rights efforts today: Defending human rights to the free confession of faith, prayer and worship (?), preservation of religious and cultural traditions, observance of religious principles in both private life and public action; Supporting the family in its traditional understanding as well as fatherhood, motherhood and childhood…'[61]

The same document expresses concern for the family and its understanding in the modern world:

'The modern law should view the family as the lawful union of man and woman in which natural conditions for raising children are created. Law is also called to respect the family as an integral organism and to protect it against destruction provoked by moral decay. In safeguarding the rights of the child, the legal system should not deny his parents a special role in his education, which is inseparable from their worldview and religious experience.'[62]

In 2020, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese publicly presented the document 'For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church.' This document particularly highlights a more optimistic embrace of the concept of human rights:

'Orthodox Christians should support the language of human rights, not because it is a language fully adequate to all that God intends for his creatures, but because it preserves a sense of the inviolable uniqueness of every person, and of the priority of human goods over national interests, while providing a legal and ethical grammar upon which all parties can, as a rule, arrive at certain basic agreements. It is a language intended to heal divisions in those political communities in which persons of widely differing beliefs must coexist. It allows for a general practice and ethos of honoring each person's infinite and inherent dignity (a dignity, of course, that the Church sees as the effect of God's image in all human beings) … More than that, it must thank God for the riches of all the world's many cultures, and for the gracious gift of their peaceful coexistence in modern societies.'[63]

Within the document itself, a significant section is devoted to the protection and well-being of children.

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61 'Osnovy ucheniya Russkoy pravoslavnoy tserkvi o dostoinstve svobode i pravakh cheloveka (2008)'.
62 Ibid.
63 'For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church', 2020.

'The innocence of children is, therefore, a thing of extraordinary holiness, a sign of the life of the Kingdom graciously present in our very midst and must be the object of the Church's ceaseless concern and diligence. The protection and care of children is the most basic and most essential index of any society's dedication to the good.'[64]

Do the stances of the Orthodox Church prompt consideration about its ability to align its goals and duties with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*? In Article 5 of the Convention, we can readily identify significant aspects that correlate with what we have discussed about the Church's approach to children: 'States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.'[65] From all that we mentioned up to now, it is evident that the Church identified itself as an extended family that cares for the child's upbringing. The Church as a family has been affirmed in the document For the Life of the World:

'Ideally, of course, both parents will be present all through the rearing of their children; but sometimes, as a result of death, divorce, or other misfortunes, the task falls to one parent alone. In these circumstances, the Church has a special responsibility, as the family of Christ's body, to lend its solace and support—material, emotional, and spiritual. Moreover, the Church should extend the sacramental gift of baptism to all children, irrespective of the manner in which they were conceived or adopted.'[66]

Based on Orthodox teachings, the Church is bound to its role and duty toward its members. From this standpoint, the Church cannot casually disregard any law or document prohibiting its involvement in children's education and upbringing. This does not imply coercion. Even in the early stages of its existence, respecting free will, the Church instituted sponsors for baptising young children and introduced guardians. However, the Church also emphasised eschatological salvation as its primary goal. Eschatological salvation does not disregard our historical existence; instead, it affirms the significance of earthly life. The 6th article of the Convention confirms, 'States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life.'[67] In its comprehension, the Church recognises life not solely in worldly terms but also acknowledges the inherent potential for eternal life, a universal pledge for every individual derived

64 Ibid.
65 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', 2023.
66 'For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church', 2020.
67 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', 2023.

from our Imago Dei. Within this teaching, the Orthodox Church acknowledges the unparalleled value of each human being both existentially and ontologically, thereby fostering the Church's sensitivity and unquestionable responsibility in such domains.

It would seem that the Convention, especially in Article 14, testifies that the state parties 'shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.'[68] The child's entitlement to religious freedom presents a chance for the Church to participate in educational realms, which had been prohibited for the Church in former communist countries for numerous years. Take, for instance, the prohibition against Religious Education (RE) in Yugoslavia in 1952, which obstructed the Church's capacity to provide improved care for children and their entitlement to gain a deeper understanding of their religion.[69] After being banned, RE was reestablished in Serbian state schools in 2001, allowing traditional communities to have their own confessional teaching. The Serbian Orthodox Church, even though it is the majority religious denomination, insisted during the dialogue with the government that all other denominations should have their own RE, respecting diversity and multiculturalism in Serbia.[70] Advocating for RE in public schools corresponds with the principles outlined in Article 14. Maintaining RE to offer valuable insights into religious teachings and worldviews is crucial, safeguarding children facing diverse and potentially harmful influences.

Although the *Convention* outlines the normative structure governing the roles of parents, the state, international institutions, and non-governmental organisations in children's upbringing in a well-balanced manner, there is a call to update this framework, especially regarding children's involvement in the media and ensuring their safety in the virtual realm of the internet.[71] Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew stated in his 2016 Proclamation of Christmas:

> 'A child's soul is altered by the influential consumption of electronic media, especially television and the internet, and by the radical transformation of communication. Unbridled economics transforms them, from a young age, into consumers, while the pursuit of pleasure rapidly causes their innocence to vanish.'[72]

There is also an obligation to prevent the exposure of children to gender ideology and trans-humanistic medical procedures.

> 'In itself, this is nothing new in the human condition, but ours is an age in which sexuality has become yet another area of life colonised by the logic of

68 Ibid.
69 Jović, 2011, pp. 78–89.
70 Jović, 2017, pp. 11–20.
71 Devrnja 2022, p. 114.
72 'For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church', 2020.

consumerism and the dynamics of the market. Sexuality has today, in fact, become as much a consumer strategy or consumer product—tantalising in its fluidity and pervasiveness—as an innate dimension of human personality. The Church and the community of the faithful must offer young adults a vision of sexual relations as life-giving and transfiguring: an intimate union of body, mind, and Spirit, sanctified by holy matrimony. The body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Corinthians 6:19), and even in its sexual nature is called to exhibit the sanctity of God's dwelling place.'[73]

This structure should also be upheld by values that acknowledge the distinct and indispensable role of parents in shaping the childhood and upbringing of every child.[74] The document *For the Life of the World* assigns a particular responsibility to parents, urging them to exert more significant influence and supervision over their children:

'To protect children against this profound perversion of their created natures is one of the most urgent responsibilities incumbent upon adult Christians in the age of mass communication. St. John Chrysostom advises parents that they serve as "gatekeepers of the senses" for their children. A gatekeeper is not a tyrant, as Chrysostom makes clear; but, in controlling a child's access to the world, the gatekeeper endows him or her with the ability to govern his or her own appetites in later life. And this role of gatekeeping may be more important today than ever before, given how completely our senses can be overwhelmed by the incessant din and spectacle of modern mass media.'[75]

These verses do not suggest that parents should hand over their children to society; it is the opposite. Parents are encouraged to protect and safeguard their children from the potentially harmful impact of the broader society. Considering this fundamental aspect, it is essential to highlight that there has been a recent surge in attempts to adopt a pessimistic approach toward defining the role of the family and immediate social surroundings of children within the norms governing their social status and rights. This shift is occurring under the guise of addressing deviations in children's developmental experiences, which are seen as individual, sporadic, unregulated, and not subject to normative guidelines.[76]

4.1. Household as Political

In Aristotle's time, the concept of οἶκος (oikos, or household) held great importance in his interpretation of politics. The household was formed from natural and social unions (man and woman, parents and children, master and slave). A collection of

73 Ibid.
74 Devrnja, 2022, p. 114.
75 'For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church', 2020.
76 Devrnja, 2022, p. 113.

households formed a village, and a collection of villages established a distinctive political community (koinōnía politikḗ)[77], which Aristotle designated as the central concept of his political idea, the pólis (πόλις). The pólis was nothing but the ultimate result of a development driven by the natural impulse of people to create a political community of citizens.[78] It is evident how relevant the household is for maintaining a society, even as a metaphysical concept. It not only embeds itself within the social structure but also the political framework inherent in the concept of oikos. It is not coincidental that the Pastoral Epistles in the New Testament specifically emphasise the significance of authority, linked to divine providence, prominently highlighted in Titus 3:1 and 1 Timothy 2:1–2.[79]

Thomas Hobbes, arguably the most significant and the only genuinely systematic political thinker, spoke of the pre-political (natural) state, implying a struggle of all against all. According to Hobbes, it was not a state of ongoing war but its persistent potentiality, a concept we always acknowledge. From this fear and awareness of the potential for war arises resentment, anger, and destructive aggressiveness. Each sees themselves as a potential victim of murder. Cultivating our aggressive nature gives birth to political culture in a narrower sense. Out of the total vulnerability of all arises political coexistence, secured by the authority of power—ultimately, the state's authority.[80]

The dark secret behind modern organised society is not safety but the perpetual jeopardy of every life. Hence, the principle of any society is no longer an ethical alliance between *logos* and *nomos* but the balancing of brutal forces beyond good and evil.[81] Carl Schmitt makes a shift from Hobbes. According to him, the potential war of individuals has evolved into a potential war of the communities. Hobbes' idea follows that an individual is only partially obligated to submit to the state, as the purpose of the state is to preserve the life of the individual. In the other case, it implies linking the "political" with the notion of "absolute obligation", especially if we equate communities with the people. Hence, an 'absolute obligation' arises to sacrifice one's life for the community.[82] We could affirm that the family is the foundation of society to the extent that its members are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for another – out of the otherness of the other (the struggle for their preservation), for the other in their – unique – being.[83] Political freedom ultimately demands risking one's own consciousness and sense of self.[84] Therefore, the family is not just a "cell of society" but the minimum framework in which the political intersects with the ethical.[85] Con-

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77 Zunjic, 1995, p. 228.
78 Ibid.
79 Džalto, 2021, p. 36.
80 Kocijančič, 2016, pp. 92–93.
81 Ibid., p. 94.
82 Ibid., p. 97.
83 Ibid., p. 133.
84 Ibid., p. 97.
85 Ibid., p. 133.

sequently, the destruction of the family leads to the destruction of the political being, understanding of political freedom, removal of any collective identity, and potential liberation of people that would lead to control of the forces that do not recognise otherness and intrinsic value of each being. Put differently, the imbalance we frequently experience, highlighting the individual's rights over the family as a collective entity, inherently will lead to the individual's liberation from their own self.

5. Conclusion

The values upheld by the nuclear family, the prevailing and sought-after structure for defining social, emotional, and communal aspects of the family today, might seem far removed from the traditional family models that characterised Judeo-Christian civilisation for centuries. Nonetheless, they remain the cornerstone of a proper, constructive, and responsible approach to raising children, one that we are obligated to endorse and safeguard through personal example and a normative legal framework. For children, the family stands as the most suitable and ideal social and emotional environment for their upbringing, and any encouragement of such a model through international documents and state laws should be commended.

The Apostle Paul reminds us, 'And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).' Conforming solely to Christ signifies the birth of a new identity, establishing a critical relationship with the reality we inhabit. The Church's mission should focus on the ongoing development of believers' identities. Its imperative lies in fostering a community comprised of responsible individuals—active participants in history, striving to affirm the values of the Kingdom of God within the context of human history.

Through this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate the significance of baptism for the early Church as it provided a unique identity for children within the family, but even more within the Church as an extended family. The newly baptised child affirms children's ontological importance within the family unit. Before Christianity, children were almost treated similarly to slaves. Emphasising the ontological identity instilled in children led to stronger familial bonds and the overall family unit. At the same time, the Church became a family for the baptised child, bearing responsibility and involvement in those actions within society that would endanger the well-being of children. Through its documents, the Orthodox Church has highlighted the importance of children while drawing attention to the significance of the family as a whole. Only in this dialectic between the family and the child does the Church find the most optimal environment for our society. Currently, the Serbian Orthodox Church adheres to canonical context and Church regulations evident in this work, yet lacks an officially adopted document outlining a child safeguarding policy or dedicated institution.

In today's world, children and their well-being are jeopardised once more, insisting on their individuality, which tends to obliterate the importance of the family and its significance. The underlying principles of all the canons and rules we have discussed highlight baptism as a transformative event affirming biological birth as the potential eternal birth of each child. This sacrament signifies the baptised child's entry into a new family—the Church community. It is no longer solely the duty of parents to safeguard their children; the responsibility is shared, and the Church assumes its role as a family of eschatological significance, affirming the dignity of each individual.

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