In the Eastern Orthodox and in the teaching of the Church Fathers which undergirds the
theology of those Churches, economy or oeconomy (Greek: οικονόμια, economia) 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 "economia", and the concept attaching to it, are utilized especially with
regard to two types of "handling": (a) divine economia, 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
economia (or) ecclesiastical economia, 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 economia:

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 "economia" means, as already noted, "handling", "management", "disposition".
In general then, "economia" 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 "economia according to strictness
(exactness)" and the latter, "economia according to leniency." Economia 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, "economia" came to be used as a synonym for "economia
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 "economia according to
exactness (strictness)". Thus in this more recent use of terms, the dichotomy "economia
according to leniency" vs. "economia according to exactness (strictness, preciseness)," is
replaced by "economia" 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 economia is correctly used and applied (that is, as a
modification in the application of the usual rule) such correct application of economia 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.

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