

What is the Church?

Professor Serge S. Verhovskoy

For the majority of Orthodox Christians in America, the Church is reduced to primarily "their parish." In the parish there will be (1) a Church building where the services are celebrated; (2) a priest to celebrate the services and to care for the religious needs of the individual parishioners; and sometimes (3) a Church council for directing the parish business; (4) a Sunday School; (5) banquets, picnics and other such affairs for socializing among the parishioners and for collecting funds. The Bishop is "necessary" to ordain priests and to celebrate solemn pontifical services.

Each Orthodox Christian has religious "obligations": to attend Church, to confess and receive communion once a year, to baptize his children, to be married in Church, to bury the dead, to keep the holidays according to the customs. Concerning the moral life, the majority of Christians try not to sin too greatly or openly in order to preserve their reputation and to be considered "decent" people and Christians.

The simple and limited character of such a view of the Church does not make it false. The Orthodox rarely denies their faith consciously. Parishes exist. The Church lives. But one cannot fail to recognize the fact that such a view of the Church which we have described is extremely, even dangerously, limited.

The chief mistake of many Orthodox in America lies in the fact that they forget about the Church beyond the limits of their own parish. Some even go to such foolishness as to proclaim their parish as "independent". Independent from whom? From the Church? But a parish which has separated itself from the Church is a sinful "private assembly"-the leaders of which must be punished as heretics and rebels.

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. There should be no schism in the body; but each member should have some care one for another. And whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." (I Cor. 12: 12-16, 25-27).

Thus St. Paul speaks about all the Christians, as members of the Church. And we must say the same thing about all Christian groups, about each diocese and in general, about each part of the Church. Only in their unity do all parishes and dioceses comprise the one Body of Christ, one universal, catholic-' Church. What parish, or what part of the Church can say to the other: "I don't need you-I exist by myself." The separated member of the body is a dead, corrupted member. All Churches must care for each other, helping each other and the whole Church.

Let each parish ask: "What have we done for other parishes, for the whole Church? Have we helped them? Do we think in general about the entire Church as a whole, or at least about the Orthodox Church in America?"

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

This is how the great Apostle teaches. This is the true measure of the life of the Church. We believe neither in the parish: nor in any kind of local Church but in one catholic apostolic Church, in the Church which was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit through the prophets and apostles and which has existed since then throughout the whole world for already almost 2000 years.

Our Church is the Church of the martyrs, of the great theologians which we call the Fathers of the Church, of the great spiritual athletes, of the great Christian culture, civilizations and empires. How can we forget all this and concern ourselves only with the every-day affairs of our small groups? How can we forget the fact that our brothers behind the iron curtain have been fighting for decades already for that very faith which is ours, that they are ready even for martyrdom in order to defend their Churches from persecution? To our shame we must say that in the midst of persecution they are doing more for Church life than we here in full freedom and wealth. How can we forget that Orthodoxy in America lives in anarchy, division, almost without schools; that Orthodox Christians have less influence on the life of our great country than any sectarians?

A great responsibility lies upon all of us Orthodox for our Church. We must know who we are. The Church is the "pillar and foundation of truth." But what do we know about the truth of Orthodoxy? Do we know the Holy Scriptures? Do we know the theology of the Holy Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils? Do we know at least our services and our feasts? This world has its own truth, and our children study this truth in the high schools and colleges. But do they learn much in our Sunday Schools, where even the teachers know so little? And where are our Orthodox high schools and colleges? Where is the Orthodox educational work, where are the books about Orthodoxy, where are the libraries? The treasures of Orthodoxy lie under the bushel and the non-Orthodox are often more interested in them than we Orthodox ourselves.

Priests and bishops are needed not merely for celebrating services, sacraments and other rites, nor simply for organizational work. They are the leaders of the Church who have gifts of grace from God. But someone will say: leadership in our Church is not on a sufficiently high level; and this is not just in America, but even in the near East. Why is this so?

There are two main reasons for the inadequacy of our ecclesiastical leadership: the inadequacy in the preparation of our clergy, and the desires of the layman to degrade the clergy. If a layman must know Orthodoxy, then what must we say about the priests? If every Orthodox is called to know how the Church must be structured, what the chief problems of the Church life must be, then so much more the priests and bishops. If we all must be holy, then so much the clergy must be examples of Christian life and fidelity to the Church. In order to obtain all this clergyman must pass through a good school to obtain knowledge and real experience of the Christian life.

In America even the best bishops and priests, instead of leading the Church and spending their energy on fruitful work, often must endure disobedience and arbitrariness of the laymen. How many parishes do we have in which all power is expended in quarrels, persecution of the priest, disobedience to the bishops; there only achievement is often to increase the parish wealth? Is this Orthodoxy? What can the priest or bishop do if the laymen do not give them the possibility to guide the life of the Church, if they are compelled to fight with their own people and not with the enemies of the Church?

The laymen have a huge significance in the Church, not because they constitute, as laymen, a special class in the Church with special rights, but because they are Orthodox Christians, living members of the Church, the Body of Christ. The clergy are only leaders, intermediaries between God and the Church on earth, but all members of the

Church, whoever they may be, must live the fullness of Christian life and labor harmoniously for the good of the Church, for the glory of God and Holy Orthodoxy. Every Christian is valuable and all of his efforts for God are welcome. But let us serve God in the spirit of His Truth; let us serve the Church venerating its teachings and rules. Let us not replace the teachings of the Church with our ignorant human ideas, or the Canons of the Church with our human rules and regulations.

The Church is one because there is one God. There is one truth of Orthodoxy. The structure of the Church is established by God. We must be Orthodox, and not invent our own Orthodoxy.

The moral Christian life does not consist merely in participating in the services and in keeping the Ten Commandments. Christianity is not mere "honesty": Christians are called to union with God and to a life of faith, in peace and in communion among themselves. Union with God and men, love, unity, peace, cooperation in the faith in all this is the essence of Christianity and the Church. This is what makes the Church the Church. If we are members of the Body of Christ we must always be with Christ, live by His Spirit, stand before God. We cannot love either God or our neighbors if our souls are not cleansed from all sinfulness and from all concerns which stifle us, those petty feelings, passions and thoughts which are connected with the external world and external impressions.

The spiritual life is constant attention to that which occurs in our souls, to our internal relationship to God and men, to the interior life of men. Only if we ourselves live spiritually does the Church reveal itself to us as a spiritual organization, as the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of saints and sanctity, the Kingdom in which truth and love constitute the essence of life.