

The Place of the Sacraments in the Life of the Eastern Christians.

ONE of the consequences of schisms within the Christian Church is the loss of interest and mutual understanding among the members of the separate confessions. This is particularly true in regard to the relations between the Eastern and Western Christians. They have completely *lost sight* of each other, and the information which they still possess is of such a nature as to make each think the other as degraded and unattractive as possible. All the Western Christians, Roman, Anglican, or Reformed have at least one feature in common, and that is their feeling of superiority with regard to the Eastern Christians, who are traditionally described in the West as ignorant, superstitious, and lacking in missionary zeal.⁽¹⁾ This belief is shared by the majority of Western Christians, but few of them are aware that Eastern Christians are equally convinced of their unquestionable superiority, and consider their Western brethren as degenerate, and as having lost real knowledge of the Christian religion.

This attitude of suspicion, misunderstanding and ignorance has lately considerably improved and there is a growing desire on the part of both the East and the West to understand each other, and to obtain not a caricature but a real picture of the life and faith of the other confession. The Oecumenical movement with its conferences has greatly helped in the dispersing of prejudices; no less fruitful have been the contacts between the Russian Christians in Exile and the Christians of the West, especially of Great Britain, who have been meeting regularly for the last ten years. The work of the Scoto-Russian Fellowship of St. Andrew and of the Anglo-Orthodox Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius must be specially mentioned. One of the

⁽¹⁾ The widely spread belief that the Eastern Church is not missionary-minded is one of the most typical cases of misunderstanding which so often bar the road to co-operation among the divided Christians. The Eastern Church has in reality always been as missionary-minded as the Western denominations. The Russian Church before the revolution had four missions abroad and about twenty-five within the Russian Empire. See my article *The Eastern Orthodox Church and its Missionary Work*, *The East and the West Review*, July, 1938.

most encouraging consequences of the friendly contacts between Christians belonging to different traditions is the growing realisation of the fundamental unity of the Christian faith as professed by the majority of the present confessions. In cases when a divergency exists it often is of a complementary rather than of a contradictory character. This is particularly obvious in those points where the East and the West failed in the past to agree and understand each other. In most of these cases it was more the difference in the interpretation than in the statement of a fact which destroyed the fellowship among Christians. The great achievement of the post-war years is the recognition that a divergence in the interpretation of the same faith is a source of enrichment of the Church life, and in no way a reason for incriminations and quarrels. The truth of this conviction can be tested even by the most controversial points which in the past provided the Christians with ample material for bitter attacks on one another, such as for instance the attitude of different confessions to the Sacraments.

Even a superficial acquaintance with the worship and the administration of Sacraments in the East and in the West⁽¹⁾ produces an impression of a striking divergence in teaching, customs, and traditions. It is necessary to remove straightaway a very widespread misunderstanding which attributes all these to differences between Eastern and Western temperament and mentality. In reality the difference is confessional and not racial, and Roman Catholics or Protestants belonging to the Eastern nations worship at their services in accordance with Western customs, and not like the members of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The 'Christian East' is therefore confined primarily to the membership in the latter Communion.

The main characteristics of the sacramental practices in every confession are usually rooted in the doctrine professed by its members, and the causes of divergence between Eastern and Western worship can be understood only in the light of their interpretation of Salvation. The West emphasises the forgiveness of sins as the most essential part of the work of Redemption. It concentrates its attention on man and his destiny, and tends to become individualistic and legalistic in its outlook. The East sees

(¹) By the 'Christian West' I mean here those features of the Church life which are common to the Roman, Anglican and the Reformed Christians of Western Europe.

Salvation as the gift of a new life in the Holy Spirit bestowed upon the whole creation. Christ's death upon the cross is not stressed so much in the East as sometimes it is in the West ; it is visualised together with the glory of the Resurrection and with the joy of the descent of the Holy Spirit. The whole presentation of Christ's redemptive work bears the seal of a more corporate, organic outlook. The Church is seldom referred to as an institution, but much more as a family, or as a new organism which includes not only men but all the living creatures.

This difference in the doctrinal interpretation of Salvation explains the difference in worship. The Sacraments in the West are usually understood as the means of securing the release from sins and as the tokens of Divine forgiveness. They are primarily the visible signs of invisible Grace. The close connection between the act of the Divine pardon and the Sacrament makes the question of the authority behind each one of them of supreme importance ; it raises the questions of their exact number, and of the right form and matter for their valid administration. It also calls for a clear definition of the condition required from individuals if they desire either to administer or to partake of the Sacraments.

All these questions and problems appear in a very different light when they are faced by the Eastern Christians. The Sacraments, called by them 'The Mysteries,' are primarily those corporate actions of a Christian Community which bring their participants into a closer and fuller fellowship with the Holy Ghost. They are mysteries of the initiation into the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity. It is the purification of the soul and body, and the regeneration of man's entire being, rather than the pardon of sins, which appeals strongly to the members of the Orthodox Church. This explains the otherwise surprising fact that the Eastern Church has never defined the number of the Sacraments⁽¹⁾, and that its prayer books contain more than forty different rites all having the same object—the sanctification of the members of the Church and of the diverse aspects of their life and labour. These rites begin with Baptism and Holy Eucharist, and gradually descend to the blessing of a meal in a Christian home, which also has a sacramental meaning.

(1) In the course of the XVII. Century, the period of a great confusion in the Eastern theology, the idea of seven sacraments was borrowed from the West. Although this teaching is widely spread now among the Eastern Christians, it has no roots in the Eastern Church, for her service books contain more than seven Sacraments.

No confusion between the main Sacraments and minor rites is made, but no sharp line of demarcation is drawn. It is one integral life of the Church which manifests itself through various channels.

The emphasis on the corporate mystical side of the Sacraments has saved the East from many controversies caused by the Western tendency towards clear logical definition. It has also saved the East from a sharp opposition between the lay and clerical orders. In the East it is the whole congregation, presided over by the duly ordained minister, that celebrates all the Sacraments and services of the Church. The stronger sense of the cosmic significance of the Incarnation shared by the East assigns a much more important place to the *matter* in the Sacrament than is done in the West. The water in Baptism, the bread and wine at the Eucharist, are not for the East mere symbols of inward grace. They form a most essential part in the sacramental action ; they are tokens of the future transfiguration of the cosmos, they are the pledges that man has a sacred duty to collaborate with his Creator in the coming of His Kingdom. The redemption of the world does not mean to the East the deliverance of the soul from the prison of our material surroundings, but the regeneration of the spirit and matter which are both part of the Divine order although affected and disfigured by sin.

These general remarks can help others to understand the peculiarity of the Eastern use of different Sacraments. Baptism for instance is always administered through immersion. It is not only the soul which is washed, but the water itself is sanctified. The personal formula "I baptize thee" is unknown in the East, for it is not the minister but the whole Church which is the true celebrant of every baptism. The Orthodox priest therefore says "The servant of God, John or Mary, is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost". Baptism is immediately followed by Confirmation, which is the ordination into the lay orders of the Church. Lay people in the East are not deprived of orders ; they belong to the order of Christian laity.

Confirmation is administered by a priest, by means of chrism blessed by the head of the national Church, and here again the emphasis is laid upon the administration of the Sacraments by the Church to its people.

Confession plays a very important part in the spiritual life of the Eastern Christians. The first confession is

usually made at the age of seven ; it is preceded by religious instruction, and corresponds to some extent to Confirmation in the West. In confession the same idea of the corporateness of Christian salvation is emphasised. The sinner transgresses not only before God and the person whom he has offended, but he defiles the entire community of Christians, the whole Body of Christ, and therefore, before he asks God to pardon him, he must be reconciled with his fellow-members. Confession therefore begins with the penitent's asking the forgiveness of his relatives and friends for any offences he may have committed : it is left to his discretion whether to specify his offences or not. The usual answer given is " May God forgive you " (1). When that part of the confession is over, the penitent comes to church, and there in the presence of a priest he confesses to God his transgressions. The priest is a witness appointed by the Church, and not a judge. This is made clear by his very position during the confession : he does not occupy the seat of authority, as in the West, but stands beside the penitent, both of them facing the East. When the penitent has finished his confession the priest prays to God, asking Him to pardon the sins of the penitent and to reconcile him to His Church. In the seventeenth century the Russians under the Western influence added to this prayer the absolution of sins similar to that used in the Roman Catholic Church, but this is a recent addition which does not correspond to the traditional teaching of the East. The Greeks still use the original form of absolution which is as follows : " May God Who pardoned David through the prophet Nathan when he confessed his sins . . . may the same God, through me a sinner, pardon thee everything in this world, and cause thee to stand uncondemned before His awful throne."

The Eucharist, being the focus of the whole sacramental life of the Church, naturally reveals with a greater clarity than any other service all the differences and similarities between the East and the West. The very structure of the Orthodox Churches displays an entirely different approach to this most sacred Christian rite. The Eastern churches have a screen (*iconostasis*) which separates the Communion Table (which is called ' the throne ' in the East) from the rest of the building ; and the fact that the celebrant remains

(1) By saying this an Orthodox Christian shows that he does not take upon himself the right to forgive sins, which belongs to God alone, but he makes it clear that no personal grievance is left between him and the penitent.

unseen during the major part of the service has far-reaching consequences. The Eastern Eucharist is a drama, representing all the principal events of the Incarnation, starting with the Nativity and ending with the Ascension. Whenever the priest or the deacon appears in a procession before the congregation, he reminds it of the next stage in the development of the mystery. The healing and teaching mission of Jesus Christ, His solemn entry into Jerusalem, His last supper, crucifixion, death, Resurrection and Ascension are all remembered during the service. The most solemn part of the Eucharist is the time of Communion, and it is associated with Christ's victory over sin and death. The faithful are made one with the Risen Lord when they partake of the consecrated elements.

The other original features of the Orthodox Eucharist are as follows. The members of the congregation present their loaves to the celebrant at the beginning of the service, together with a list of people whom they would like to be remembered in the prayers of the Church. The priest takes out a morsel from each of these loaves, and the offering is therefore a genuinely corporate act of the whole congregation. The people receive their communion standing; leavened bread and red wine are used. Children, including infants in arms, can be communicants. This is a custom which has deeper practical consequences than might appear at first sight. Modern psychology has proved that the early stages of a child's life have an extremely important bearing upon the whole later development of personality, and that an infant is capable of profound emotional experience although its reason remains still immature.⁽¹⁾ This means that the Eucharistic life of the Eastern Christians which begins at such an early stage is more deeply rooted than is the case with many Western Christians, and this facilitates for the Easterns their fuller participation in the sacramental life of the Church. The sermon is preached either after the reading of the Gospel or after the communion of the people. In some Eastern countries, in Greece for instance, a specially authorised and trained lay preacher frequently delivers it instead of the celebrant. At the end of the service all the members of the congregation receive a piece of bread left from their corporate offerings. It is not consecrated bread, but it is a reminiscence of the *Agape* which played such a prominent part in the life of the Church

(1) It is sometimes alleged at present that the emotional development of a child is completed at the age of three.

in the first three centuries. This bread is often taken home and given to those who were not able to come to the service. There is only one Eucharist in each parish church on Sunday, and all the members of the congregation are expected to come to the same service. Eastern Christians are not frequent communicants, and they take great care in preparing themselves for the reception of the Sacrament. Nevertheless the Eucharist is the central act of worship on Sunday, and the service is usually attended by a large congregation. The belief in the Real Presence is universal, but the mode of the change is not defined. The word 'transubstantiation' is approved by some theologians and repudiated by others; its use has never been officially sanctioned and is therefore left to the discretion of individuals.

The Holy Orders in the Eastern Orthodox Church comprise Episcopate, priesthood and diaconate. The minor orders of subdeacon and reader are also widely used. The ordination always takes place during the Eucharist. The subdeacons first bring the candidate in to the midst of the congregation and ask in a loud voice the consent of the people to begin the ceremony. If the people unanimously consent by responding "He is worthy", then the candidate is brought before the priests and deacons, and the same question is asked and the same answer given. Only after this part is over is the candidate brought before the bishop, who lays his hands upon the head of the ordinand and says the following prayer: "The Divine grace elevateth N, the most pious deacon, to be a presbyter: wherefore let us pray for him, that the grace of the Holy Spirit may come upon him". The whole congregation responds to this prayer by singing "Lord have mercy".

The Eastern ordination is based on the conviction that the Holy Spirit alone can ordain the members of the Church; but His voice is made known, not so much by the inner conviction of the ordinand, as by the unanimous decision of the congregation gathered together for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Only one person therefore can be ordained at the same service, for the whole congregation is expected to ask with one accord that the Holy Spirit may descend and bless the newly ordained member of the Church, and give him the grace to become a faithful minister of the word and the Sacrament.

The Holy Unction is the sacrament of healing bodily and spiritual infirmities. In recent years its application in

the Russian Church has been extended, and it is administered now also in cases when people desire to be strengthened and purified in their spiritual and physical life. It is especially used in Lent at the time of preparation for communion during the Holy Week.

The solemnisation of holy matrimony is called in Russian "crowning", and the service in its fulness is never repeated. But in the case of the death of one of the partners, or of some other event the effect of which can be equalled to that of death and which makes it impossible to continue the married life, the Eastern Church gives its blessing to those who feel that they cannot remain single. This blessing is a penitential service, and those who marry for the second time are treated as penitents. They are not excluded from the Holy Communion, but they cannot be ordained. A priest or a deacon, if he marries a second time, even after the death of his wife, is not allowed to celebrate the sacraments.

The other sacramental services not included in the number of seven are the partaking of the holy water on the day of Epiphany (which is the feast of Christ's baptism), the taking of monastic vows, and many other acts of blessing when the Church's sanctifying grace is invoked upon the life and work of the Christians.

These are some of the most striking examples of differences between the Eastern and the Western practices, and they show how much both parts of the Church can learn from each other. The Christian West, with its emphasis on the institutional and disciplinary nature of the Church, and the East, with its vision of a Christian Community as one large family including all the living and the departed, and even the whole of creation, are complementary to each other. The modern world is in search of a new form of community; the individualism of the nineteenth century can no longer satisfy the needs of mankind, but the solution proposed by totalitarianism is equally unsatisfactory. Slowly and painfully men are beginning to see that freedom without Christ is anarchy, that unity without Him is tyranny, and that only in His Church mankind can find both unity and freedom.

But in order to realise the ideal of Christian brotherhood the members of the Church must cease their inner quarrels and dissensions. Only if they put their own house in order can they efficiently help a world which is tormented by desperate attempts to find a new and better social order.

The restoration of unity and collaboration between the Christian East and West is an indispensable condition for the further growth of the Christian Church, and it will secure to it a deeper and better knowledge of that secret of a free and yet organic fellowship, which is the greatest treasure possessed by the Church, and which it has received from its Founder as the pledge of His divine power. It is time for the Christians to show to the world that they are truly the disciples of the One Who prayed to His Father that "they all may be one, as Thou art in Me and I in Thee".

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