

## THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN CONFRONTATION WITH THE WORLD OF TODAY\*

One of the big problems which at present exercise the whole of Christendom is the need to adapt the forms of religious life to the conditions of contemporary society and to its stage of culture and technical development. This general need for a 'bringing up to date' – that is, for a renewal or an adjustment to fit the material and spiritual conditions of our time – also raises the question of whether the Orthodox liturgy can still meet the religious needs of the human soul in the conditions of present-day society. Is it necessary to recast this liturgy radically, as some more 'progressive' representatives of the Orthodox Church are already demanding? Or, on the contrary, as others claim, must we retain it with no change at all?

Here we have, incidentally, a problem which faces not only the Orthodox Church but all Christian denominations today, and each of them is doing its best to solve it as happily as possible. But as an Orthodox theologian I am going to limit my short modest study to the Orthodox Church alone. I shall try to indicate to you how the problem presents itself, what has been done so far towards its solution, and what remains to be done.

For your better understanding of the background of the problem and also of its possible solution, I think I should start by reminding you of some essential characteristics by which the Orthodox Church is clearly distinguished in its liturgical tradition from the other Christian churches and confessions.

(a) First, for Orthodox Christianity the liturgy constitutes the centre and foundation of religious life. Most of its actual rites are remarkable especially for being very ancient. In its fundamental characteristics the Orthodox liturgical rite (also called the Byzantine) represents nothing less than the development of the form of worship of the early church. It therefore retains the deep imprint of its origin, an origin Eastern and, especially, Greek. I need not speak further of certain principles and actions indispensable to worship, established by the Saviour Himself or by the Blessed Apostles. (I mean the bread and wine as the materials for the Holy Sacrifice, the use of water in baptism and oil for the anointing of the sick, the laying-on of hands as an essential part of the sacrament of ordination, and so on.) But alongside hymns and prayers of Biblical origin such

\* Opinions of a Roumanian Orthodox Theologian. Published by permission of SOCIETAS LITURGICA and the translation has been made by Mrs. Kirsteen M. Moir, Edinburgh.

as the Lord's Prayer, Simeon's prayer, and the hymns of the Blessed Virgin and of Zacharias, etc. (which the Orthodox Church faithfully preserves in its holy offices), it still uses in the Holy Liturgy many hymns and prayers dating from the period of the persecutions or the centuries following. One such is the hymn 'Hail, gladdening Light' from the order for Vespers. (It belongs to the third century.) The external structure, the order of prayers and hymns and liturgical ceremonial making up the *acolouthie* of church services in general are likewise long established. Some Orthodox countries – the Greeks, for instance – still keep the same liturgical language in their worship as was spoken in their day by the Holy Apostles and the whole church of the first three or four centuries.

Of course generations of Christians of the following centuries, especially the great Greek hymn writers, added their original contributions from the beginning of the fifth century onwards. Among these one must remember the splendid hymns which make up the great books of Orthodox Liturgy (the *Oktoëchos*, the *Pentēcostarion*, the *Triode*, the *Menologies*, etc.); but, generally speaking, these are subordinate and secondary elements, representing additions, extensions or developments of the original and essential forms and rituals. This ever-increasing enrichment has not in the least altered the fundamental idea expressed right from the beginning in the divine services. It has changed neither their general framework nor their basic forms.

(b) Taken as a whole, then, the Orthodox Liturgy at the present day has not been produced by the genius of some theologians or bishops or some synod (council) or other, nor is it the creation of a single generation of Christians, but it is the joint, anonymous achievement of the whole Orthodox Church. It is to be revered as the fruit of the working together of all the members of the Church, churchmen in monasteries and in parishes, theologians and faithful laymen, most of them unknown. The Orthodox liturgy is a way of expressing the church's tradition, it is the visible sign of the sacramental life of the church. It is the fruit nurtured by the inexhaustible flow of grace which gushes from the table of the Holy Supper and from the blood-stained Cross of Calvary and makes fertile all the soil of Christian spiritual life, like a perpetual Pentecost. The external forms of worship have grown from Orthodox piety as fruit on trees is produced from their roots and branches.

(c) Another characteristic aspect of the Orthodox Church from the liturgical point of view is the close connection between its worship and its doctrine. The same connection, no doubt, exists in all Christian churches and denominations, but for us Orthodox it is closer than for the others.

The external forms of the Orthodox service express not only the



religion and devotion of the human soul, but also the Orthodox faith or dogma or teaching. A considerable number of prayers, hymns and liturgical ceremonials have been introduced into the worship to present the truths of the faith in a form which all can understand, to protect them from the distortions of heresy and to make them familiar to the faithful. In particular the Orthodox liturgical hymns, which now make up the greater part of the evening and morning services, contain a true expression of faith and Orthodox views on Christian morals.

(d) The fourth peculiar characteristic of Orthodox worship has long been its uniformity. The Orthodox Church, as you know, is made up of several national churches. Each is organized independently of the others especially under the form and name of patriarchates. Nevertheless they maintain their unbroken unity through brotherly love, through the complete identity of their faith and, most of all, through the uniformity of their forms of worship. Since the twelfth or thirteenth century at least, the Byzantine Liturgy has been the only liturgy of the whole Orthodox Church. All the autocephalous Orthodox churches perform the same Mass, and the same daily office. They have the same rules about the sacraments, they keep the same religious festivals, the same Breviary, the same rules about fasting and so on. Public worship is thus an expression of the unity of faith and religious life by which the Orthodox churches are closely bound to one another, although separated by their independent organization, by the various languages used in worship and by the national or racial differences of their members, etc.

That is why the current Orthodox forms of worship have entered deeply into the hearts and consciousness and the religious life of our members. They have been practised over the centuries and faithfully handed down from one generation to another; they have come to be regarded with as much awe and reverence as religion itself. That is why it has been truly said that the heart of the Orthodox faith lies in its rites. [S. Boulgakoff.] Members of the Orthodox Church live and give evidence of their faith primarily by the fulfilment of their liturgical obligations; by receiving the sacraments (baptism, confession, Communion, etc.), by sharing in the Holy Mass, by celebrating the great religious festivals (Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, etc.) and by carrying out the traditional rites of caring for the dead.

It is likewise in the holy offices, in the feast days and in liturgical practices that the relationship between the priest and the people is formed and sustained. Sometimes these are the only means and opportunities of contact between the shepherd and his flock. This explains the fidelity with which – especially in the Roumanian Orthodox Church – we preserve the traditional forms of Byzantine religious art in the construction, decoration and furnishings of

churches. We do not allow there the novel and bizarre styles seen in 'churches for today', nor the diversion of church buildings from their original holy purpose by their use as public halls, theatres for lectures and shows of a more or less secular character, or places for dancing for secularized and worldly young people, in the vain hope of thus getting back people who have lapsed from Christianity.

These, then, are some of the circumstances and special characteristics of the Orthodox Church which make a 'root and branch reconstruction' and radical reform of its liturgy not only impossible, but both useless and dangerous. Such a reformation would destroy Orthodoxy's links with the beginnings of Christianity. It would put the Orthodox faith in peril and at the same time would threaten the spiritual unity of Orthodox Christendom. By such methods the Orthodox Church would be doing nothing to regain its lost members. On the contrary, it would be in danger of losing those who are still attached to it, because public worship is precisely what has kept our members in touch with the churches and what will continue to do so. An attempt to change any one of the basic elements or the original structure of this worship would be rewarded with the same failure as the absurd attempt to change the language of a nation at a given moment and replace it by another language, artificially invented in some scholars' brains.

We do not even feel the need of any kind of revision of the structure of the Orthodox Service, because the Orthodox Church has not waited for the pressures of our times to undertake a sudden revision of its worship. Like any other living function of spiritual life, the Orthodox Liturgy has gone through a continuous process of evolution, that is to say a series of modifications, in two directions. On the one hand there has been some development or the addition of new elements intended to satisfy the religious needs of members in one period or another. On the other hand, some things have been simplified or shortened, and out-of-date forms that have become superfluous or useless have been cut out. What has especially exerted its influence here has been the law of liturgical balance, that is, the natural need for the constant maintenance of a proper balance both between the religious basis (ideas, feelings, piety) and its forms of expression and also among the three functions or aims generally kept in view by the public worship of the church, namely:

- (1) The adoration of God (including the veneration of the saints in the case of the Orthodox and Roman Catholics);
- (2) The sanctification of its members' lives by divine grace, and
- (3) Their religious and moral education.

The changes necessary to establish, maintain or restore this balance have taken place slowly and almost spontaneously without



any violent total reconstructions of the service such as took place in the course of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The church authorities concerned have kept a careful but tactful watch on the working-out of this evolutionary process. Its changes sometimes took whole centuries to be completed. The authorities rarely interfered and then only when they had to protect the true faith or the general uniformity of the liturgical rite against sectarian deviations that would have led to disunity.

At this very moment one can put one's finger on some details which exemplify the continued working of this evolutionary process. Some things in the service which have grown old and out of date and no longer appropriate are in course of being dropped. This is so, for instance, with the prayers for the catechumens in order of service for Mass. Other more recent elements are tending to take the place of those and to be gradually hallowed by their use in worship. But neither of these changes is connected with the deepest reality of Orthodox worship, with its foundation or its characteristic confession.

Quite recently, for instance, there has been a demand, which in some places has been met in practice, for the shortening of some excessively long forms of worship, the anointing of the sick, burial, etc. In these the *acolouthie*, drawn up in ancient days for members who had more time to give to divine services, has been continually enriched and lengthened over the centuries. Such demands and practices come especially from branches of the Orthodox Church in the West and from missionary lands.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that when the Orthodox faith is transplanted to the West it should lose its Byzantine character, or that its liturgical rite should be 'westernized', as is sometimes claimed.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, given the limited resources of Orthodox communities scattered through the West as well as those of churches that are in process of being formed in missionary countries, we shall have to make concessions not only about things like the length and composition of the service, but also about the use, shape and colours of ecclesiastical vestments and the style and furnishing of churches. (The *iconostasis* for instance might be dispensed with, and concessions will be necessary about the opening and shutting of the 'Royal Door' and of the curtain of the *iconostasis* (the *vêlothyron*) and other details of the service.) [In Orthodox churches the sanctuary is separated from the Nave by a high screen made up of several rows of icons and therefore called the *iconostasis* or the *katapetasma* (Roumanian: *catapeteasmă*) or *templum* (Roumanian: *tîmplă*). It has three doors. In the middle is the door called 'Royal', covered by a curtain which is opened or closed at various points in the liturgy. The two side doors are called the 'Diaconal' doors.<sup>3</sup>]

We have to reckon also with the ever-increasing demands for a return to some liturgical customs and rules which have been given up or altered in the course of the centuries with bad results for religious life. People ask, for instance, for the celebration of the Mass of the Presanctified in the evening (at Evensong) as was formerly done. Today it is everywhere celebrated in the morning. They would also like the most important prayers in the Mass to be read aloud; nowadays they are recited by the priests secretly or in a whisper.

But, with very few exceptions, none of the autocephalous branches of the Orthodox Church has so far given its official approval to such shortened forms or alterations.<sup>4</sup> It is only the Panorthodox Synod (the general assembly representing the whole Orthodox Church) which has the right to decide such arguments and it is its prerogative to solve problems and take basic decisions about standard practice binding on the whole of Orthodoxy. A meeting of this body, which is about to take place, already has on its agenda several problems about alterations to the service, e.g., the revision of and critical editing of the text of the liturgy, a definite statement about permissible simplifications in the form of service in parishes, the bringing about of uniformity in the Church calendar, the greater use of readings from the Old Testament, etc. But most of all the ideal of a more extensive, a more active and effective share of our lay members in public worship must remain the chief target for efforts when we aim at the improvement of the liturgical life of the church, because public worship has always been and always will be the true source and foundation of Orthodox spiritual life. But to achieve this, the venerable forms of worship must be better known and understood and better popularized among our members, so that they may take part in them effectively and with the fullest benefit to their religious and moral life. There is thus a need for serious instruction in the liturgy for our members.

However, what remains to be done in the Orthodox Church for the adaptation of its forms of worship will not have the breadth of the liturgical reform that has been let loose upon the Catholic world by Vatican II nor the proportions of the reform proposed in the Church of England and other denominations. For we consider that if there is a widespread religious crisis in present-day Christianity, the source of the trouble should be sought, not in the shortcomings of religious services, but in the spiritual state of the present generation, which is largely dechristianized.

We cannot foresee what answers will be given at the coming Panorthodox Synod to the liturgical problems raised so far, only some of which we have mentioned here; but we hope that the members of the Synod will keep in mind three criteria that are important in this connection:



- (a) The two thousand years' experience of the church, which has proved and hallowed the basic forms of public worship. These have come to be revered and held sacred because of their great age, their essential beauty and their high value for theology and for instruction.
- (b) The principle of liturgical balance, briefly stated above, which is a necessary condition for a normal liturgical life in the church. There is little need to seek it or to restore it at the present stage of our service as it is largely a good thing we already have.
- (c) The premisses already given in the evolutionary process of the service, about which we have just been speaking. These by themselves suggest the changes, the cuts or the additions which might be made in the traditional structure of the devotional offices of the church or in the whole liturgical practice of the church.

But our attention must be directed not only towards those aspects of the service which could be improved, but also towards those men who conduct the services, who by their very vocation are the first we should expect and require to have a thorough knowledge of the spiritual riches and beauty of the Orthodox worship and to show these off to advantage by their way of celebrating the liturgical services. For the interest of the faithful in the liturgy, as well as their willingness to take an intelligent and active part in the liturgical life of the Church, cannot be guaranteed only by the quality and the intrinsic perfection of the forms of worship. These things depend also on the deep, sincere respect of churchmen towards the traditional services, on their devout bearing when they conduct them, and on their genuine faith and religious fervour acting as an example to the faithful.

#### NOTES

1. See, e.g., Emilianos, bishop of Melos, 'En vue du Prosynode: les problèmes soulevés', art. in the review *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, t. XV-<sup>e</sup>, fasc. IV-<sup>e</sup>, pp. 352-7.
2. See, e.g., *Rapport de la Commission Liturgique de l'Eglise Catholique Orthodoxe de France*, Paris, 1968, pp. 58, 59, 62.
3. See S. Salaville, *Les Liturgies orientales, notions générales, éléments principaux*, Paris, 1932, p. 102.
4. See e.g., the decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Church (Patriarchate of Moscow) by which Russian parishes in America and Western Europe are allowed to hold the Mass of the Presanctified in the evening at the evening service (*Journal Mosk. Patriarch*, 1961, I, pp. 4-5).

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