

Art, Theology and Russian Piety in Relation to Liturgy*

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The influence of Byzantium upon the process of Christianization of Rus' is enormous, it is a real fact¹. It revealed itself in all spheres of style of the Old Russian State. Quoting a contemporary scholar: »The Old Rus' adopted from the Byzantine culture the most close features or rested upon incidental monuments of Byzantine art not from time to time as was often the case with the West; it took the whole Byzantine culture as direct source and basis on which it started to erect the building of its own culture«². This is a reality, not by imposing to accept, but rather receiving by respecting the historical facts of the past which we have inherited until today.

And this close relationship between culture, art and theology, as it was developed in the earlier Byzantium, we find also in the history of the Russian people, with the Russian Schools of artists mainly of the painters of icons and also in architectural monuments, e. g. churches and liturgical objects, etc. Not only the Byzantine influence has marked the Russian church art, but also the whole process on the liturgical translations, books of worship, and prayer collections which are based precisely on the Greek original texts, keeping, of course, their Russian linguistic identity but using also Greek words which are incorporated into the new Slavonic literature.

The Byzantine culture has been marked by the richness of the liturgical and theological sources. Great spiritual and theological figures or personalities lived and enriched the New Rome, Constantinople, a city which developed the Byzantine Empire and which also greatly influenced the post-Byzantine period³.

In relation to art, Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, became the new ecclesiastical, missionary and ecumenical capital of the Empire. Therefore, a new artistic and aesthetic style was born which particularly in the East was incarnated by a theological symbolism and influenced the whole Balkan Peninsula⁴ as well as the Christianized Rus' people.

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¹ *VI. Pheidias*, *The First Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in Russia and the Russian Sources*, Athens 1966, pp. 395 ff. (in Greek).

² *V. V. Bychkov*, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, Moscow 1977, p. 171.

³ Cf. *D. Geanakoplos*, *A Short History of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople* »First among Equals« in the Eastern Orthodox Church, New York 1983, pp. 3—4.

⁴ Cf. *H. Sumner-Boyd and J. Freely*, *Strolling through Istanbul*, Istanbul 1972, pp. 1012.

All these inestimable riches of the Byzantine heritage we still experience today — we live as Orthodox everywhere, we worship and do theology with all the resources that our ancestors left to the remainder of Christianity throughout the first and second Millennium.

Therefore this interrelatedness between art and theology should be seen from a different perspective; the two poles of art and theology should be analysed in the light of liturgy (leitourgia) as a whole from a prismatic view.

Art and Theology in Relation to Liturgy

In the Orthodox Church and in all Christian churches of the world the aspect of art or artistry is part of the whole life of the Church and also relates to the faithful. Art is deeply rooted in the Teaching and Tradition of the Church. Liturgy cannot exist in the Church without art. All kinds of experiences, movements, representations have an artistic aspect, where art plays a dominating role. The best example is iconography: it can be analysed and understood theologically only if we take into consideration the »incarnation« of art in the subject-matter, colours, lines, expressions, etc. Thus art is a »liturgy of the liturgy« which forms a wholistic approach to theology.

In the creation stories, humanity and the world (cosmos) were created in an artistic perspective and with all the beauty of art carried out according to the wisdom and the plan of the Creator who is considered the first artist of humanity. It is the artist who synchronizes and harmonizes all the creation; he breathes in order to maintain the creation in beauty so that it may become a perfect paradise which — because of the human fall — will later lose its »light«, beauty and harmony.

However, the faithful make their own simple experience of art and theology, deprived of a systematic form, but based upon sacramental and spiritual experiences sealed by their testimonies within the Church of Christ.

Thus art and theology should be analyzed together and their reciprocal relationship be seen under three aspects: 1) What is the legitimate role of art in the Church? 2) How can art be determined in a theological context, in its missionary and eschatological function in relation to deification within the Church? 3) And finally, what is the role of icons in the life of the faithful in relation to worship and its place to the ecclesial community at large in the Church?

The Legitimate Role of Art in the Church

The legitimate role of art in the Church was questioned by the early monachism. But religious consciousness constantly questions this legitimate role echoing certain diatribes of the prophets of Israel. The monachism is a momentum of religious consciousness, and in any case the monastic vocation is determined by the absolute of God.

It is very easy to rate the early monachism as monophysism because not art as such, but its specific importance for the Church was underlined. The practical question is to find out what are the limitations of the implantation of art in the life of the Church. Does it need much or little, does it need the utmost or the least? Should we accept it as it is

or modify it by adapting to the folly of the Cross (i. e. to deny oneself, to lose one's life by one's own will in order to follow Christ)? It would be unjust to reduce this phenomenon of the early monachism to running away from the world and understanding this as a merely negative effort. The world, which the early monks wanted to abandon, was full of purely human beauties of Greco-Roman art; or this aesthetic system imprisoned the antique world in an immobility covering a system of vicious life. Without understanding this, the first monks in their bold initiative rejected the pagan values of art in order to search for another aesthetic. They looked for another world with its criteria for all values. They were inspired by an ideal of beauty — philokalia — and at certain times the aesthetic momentum was to penetrate this spiritual world created by them.

For the development of liturgical aesthetics Fr Alexander Schmemmann suggested a scheme which, according to my opinion, sheds an interesting light on the question: at the beginning there was a conflict between the first monks and the Christians living in the world. The latter let themselves be penetrated by an aesthetical care, but the monks required an ascetical self-liberation: e. g. they preferred to have psalmody instead of singing in their worship services. Later a synthesis took place: monachism accepted the aesthetical preoccupation and from that time on assumed a kind of monopoly in church art. It is interesting to continue this scheme and to show how the secular faithful took up the initiative during the Renaissance and especially in the period of the Enlightenment and in the 19th century. But strongly imbued by the »secularized« and desacralized aesthetics, this movement calls for a new ecclesial synthesis.

Towards a Possible Definition of Art

In order to present a definition of art, one should analyze its religious value which presents itself under two aspects:

(a) The spirit of creation, well presented also by the Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdiaeff, is one of the fundamental aspects of God's image in man⁵. For Berdiaeff, e. g. the creative instinct was an immediate data, an initial institution, which needed no demonstration, but freely determined the »ego«⁶. However, Berdiaeff did not recognize the need of asceticism in the creative thinking.

In his titanic concept of human destiny requiring utmost freedom for this destiny, Berdiaeff arrived at a kind of voluntary subjectivism seeing in the »objectivation« an attitude harmful to mankind. It is true that art should create something different from everyday reality or technology and in a different way. Indeed art should transpose reality in order to present it at the level of the spirit. But this effort is a reaction to the real objective which cannot be denied and which should not be destroyed or profaned. This is the first form

⁵ E. Porret, *La philosophie chrétienne en Russie*, Nicolas Berdiaeff, Etre et Penseur, in: *Cahiers de Philosophie*, Neuchâtel 1944, pp. 119 ff.

⁶ N. Berdiaeff, *L'esprit de Dostoïevski*, S. C. E. L., Paris 1932, p. 98; *Der Sinn des Schaffens. Versuch einer Rechtfertigung des Menschen*, Mohr-Verlag, Tübingen 1927, p. 89 ff.

of asceticism: asceticism in its relation to realism which should at the same time be respected on the one hand, and transformed without distortion on the other.

(b) Another element of any definition of art is beauty (*κάλλος*). What is beauty? I shall not try to define it, but only present some reflections. Pontius Pilate cried out before Christ: what is the truth? Was it prudence or scepticism on his part, or a presentiment before the incarnated Logos and the truth of salvation which was to explode and provoke a personal concern? Beauty at the supreme level is an attribute of God; beauty places us before a mystery. Beauty is more than art. Art looks for beauty, but attains it only relatively. Beauty is greater than art and is present in the reality independently of its representation. On the other hand, an artist can create aesthetical forms which are able to reveal the content of beauty, but he will never attain the ultimate content of beauty since it comes from above, is greater than man, yet being intimately present in him.

We encounter here a new form of asceticism: the artist should indeed listen to inspiration (i.e. at the highest level, to pray) knowing that it comes from above and is a free gift. The artist should be subordinated in humility to the beauty; he should represent it to all as an objective value, having had the privilege and responsibility of creating it.

(c) Finally, art can never be determined without the perception of the beauty of the work achieved. After having been creative, the artist contemplates his creation in the image of what God did on the seventh day. This is the significance of the Sabbath: contemplation, Eucharist («everything is good»), communion-koinonia. I do not want to say here that an artist can never declare himself/herself satisfied or content of himself/herself. On the other hand, there is a brotherly and fraternal communion — koinonia — with the artist when the piece of art is contemplated and assimilated. This presupposes a third form of asceticism: the asceticism towards the piece of art which is a means of communion. For church art this justifies the existence of an iconographic canon and of a church hymn. The canon of the Church means the submission of all to the objective and common rules of aesthetics; without this there is no chance of establishing and keeping the ecclesial communion in the studied field. This presupposes yet another form of asceticism: indeed the artist should not despise the people of God; on the contrary, he should be in solidarity with all, performing a certain service, a diakonia to all, a necessary and eminent function.

Functional Aspect of Church Art

In the perspective we have traced here, it is clear that art in the Genesis stories has a function, a religious vocation. The human being needs to express the vision of beauty, given by God, the beauty which God has given to the world by forming it. Thus he expresses this need either through an artistic creation if that is his personal vocation, or through receiving a piece of art. Man (*anthropos*), who is also a contemplative being, who prays and communicates while conveying the beauty, expresses and realizes his personal mystery. But if art is a means of being in communion with God the Creator, with the cosmos and among people, one should remember that communion is the first aim of the Church. Of course, one needs to distinguish between «utility» and «function». To affirm the ecclesial function of art means to affirm that art should express the nature and destina-

tion of the church, or the ferment given by the Saviour to the Church which at the same time is missionary and eschatological. This is clear from the fact that the Church is based upon two fundamental sacraments: Baptism, »... go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ...« (Mt 28:19) and the Eucharist, »as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes« (1 Cor 11:26).

Missionary Functions of Church Art

The Church is missionary not only because it has missionary stations in remote places; it is missionary in its being, in other words: mission does not concern only the *bene esse* of the Church, but belongs to its *esse*. In this world, indeed, the Church needs to be always vigilant, constantly reformed in order to preserve its pentecostal origin. Moreover, the Church is not a refuge from the salvation, but the community of those who have a vocation to save the world with Christ and in Christ. The essential tool of the mission is preaching: »Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ...« (Mt 29:19); this is also understood as art in the life of the Church.

However, language and speech are not the only means of human expression and ecclesial preaching; art is also a necessary and very effective tool, since man is not reduced only to reason. Man understands the truth in its logical form through reason, but also through beauty, the aesthetic sense with his eyes and ears. This is not a pure game; church art should express the revelation, preach it in a special, more intuitive way than the word, but in the same sense and in connection with it. For church art and preaching of the word have the same missionary vocation. This condemns in the Church any attempt of formless art, negating asceticism and objectivity; this kind of art breaks down the brotherly communion.

This is to deny the image of God in man and in God his formidable face revealed by God. For the same reason the vocal music is the only musical formula admitted in the church by the Orthodox Tradition. This explains once more the requirement of writing the name of Christ or of the saints on the icons: no icon exists of the Father for the dove is only a symbol. In the Orthodox Tradition there is a kind of mistrust towards the forms of art which are not linked to the word and are subordinated to the light of the Logos.

We find the aesthetic truth not only in the analyzed theme, but also in the manner, in the artistic technology, in the forms and colours or senses: the truth in pieces of art is rather suggested than imposed through a demonstration. Icons have indeed taught the Orthodox faithful, but in a way that differs from what one sometimes thinks; they revealed the permanent and concrete values of evangelical teaching, of the Saviour's Resurrection, Ascension and Transfiguration as well as the mysterial and eschatological aspects of the Church. The icons have succeeded in remaining faithful to a certain artistic concept rather than in multiplying subjects and themes.

Eschatological Nature of Church Art

Church art should also express the eschatological nature of the Church. Art in itself has an eschatological character since it transposes the reality given at the level of the Spirit and tries to go beyond the limits of time and space. Art is a search of the immortal and absolute, never satiated: its eschatological character is based upon its religious function. This becomes quite evident in iconography with its eschatological truth of the human body glorified after the death trial, with the required absence of the perspective, or perhaps with a reverse perspective: the prohibition of statues (bas-reliefs or haut-reliefs) is dictated by the concern for eschatological truth deprived of its worldly dimensions. This liberation, this sobriety not only in the art of technology, but also in the application of church art, is a requirement dictated by the eschatological nature of the Church.

It is important not to create the impression of a final installation in this judged or condemned world, called to salvation through an effort of conversion. Church art should never give the impression that the Church is a prisoner of the world; it should discover its royal sovereignty, the glorious liberty of God's children. If we want to adapt (although this is not my opinion) Freud's terminology, the sublimation of Christian art is paradox; it goes through the judgment and conversion; it is under the sign of the Cross because only the way of the Cross leads to the glory of the Resurrection.

It is evident that under the pressure of today's ambiguous and desecralized world, church art experiences the tension of secularization, an imitation of the contemporary world. But the Church is a renewing ferment in itself. Thus it should purify its specific art whose principal lines of development we just tried to trace here. Therefore, it is important that church art be a kind of shock art, at the same time missionary and eschatological, according to the very being of the Church.

The Russian Soul and Piety

One of the principal manifestations of the religious element, perhaps its central manifestation, and one of the creative forces which played and still play an obviously important role in the interior life of the Russian people, is a spiritual state designated in Russian by the term «umilenie», a word which resists translation⁷. It could perhaps be rendered as «a sudden softening of the heart» or «a flood of deep emotion in the heart». It is a sudden and unexpected impulse which takes hold of mankind, a feeling of inexplicable tenderness which seizes the hardest of hearts . . . the anguished search for purity and spiritual peace, and the admiration of purity and peace when seen anywhere beyond the self; it is the thrill of love and forgiveness, the tears of repentance and joy, and the

⁷ Cf. N. Arseniev, *The Spiritual Tradition of Russian Culture*, Frankfurt/M. 1959 (in Russian); and also see his article in French «Quelques traits de l'expérience religieuse russe», *Cahiers de la Nouvelle Époque* 3 (1946), Paris; F. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, Harvard University Press 1944, pp. 94—110; E. Behr-Sigel, *Études d'Hagiographies russes*, *Irénikon* 12 (1935).

fight of self-offered in joy. Throughout its thousand years history, in the midst of all its sufferings, sins, weaknesses and faults, the Russian people has always prized the faculty. It appreciated it, it was longing for it, and at times this feeling descended, healing and pacifying the soul. What characterizes this overflowing of the heart is that it is usually also an act of contrition. But the Russian people by its isolation has often felt its sinfulness, and whenever it has been truly religious it has felt with a deep and humble understanding the overwhelming greatness of that grace which brings renewal. It is indeed the fact of having experienced this feeling himself and of knowing how to present it, which raises Dostoevsky to the level of a true revealer of the soul of the people, and — what is more — of the human soul in general, in its encounter with the divine. In this he is deeply national in the profoundest meaning of this word, as he himself understood it, not because the picture he gives of the Russian people is a precise description from the ethnological viewpoint, but because he reveals what the Russians themselves know to be the source and nourishment of their life in its depths. The conversion which transforms mankind's interior life suddenly, after a long preparation . . . the action of divine grace on mankind's heart, this is one of the great themes to which Dostoevsky returns again and again. Thus, the theme of the sinner and his conversion, of this healing spiritual upheaval, is something which Dostoevsky felt profoundly to be a personal as well as national theme. He may be described as a painter of sin and grace, of the power of sin and moral depravity, but also of the equally astonishing triumph of grace over sin. This theme is of the utmost importance in the Russian soul of the people: Dostoevsky understood that he was touching here the very roots of a nation's existence.

The love of *religious or cultic beauty*, so deeply rooted in the Russian popular soul, may also to a large extent be explained by this overflowing of emotion before the boundless condescension of God.⁸ The aesthetic charm of the cult of the whole atmosphere of the Church, influence and characteristic of the Byzantine period, had a profound effect on the distant ancestors of present-day Russians. The story of the conversion of St Vladimir towards the end of the 10th century bears witness to this.

According to a legend, Vladimir had sent emissaries to different lands in order to find the best religion. They came to the Volga Bulgarians (who were Muslims) and saw their cult, »but there was nothing joyous about it; on the contrary, everything there was sad and gloomy, and their religion was not good«. What they saw among the Germans, pleased them no more. « We came to the Germans and saw them worship at length in their churches, but we saw no beauty there. » They went then to the Greeks and the Greeks took them to the place where they worshipped their God. »And we did not know if we were in heaven or on earth, for on earth there is no such beauty. Nor do we know what we ought to say. One thing only do we know: that God was living there with men and women, and that their form of worship is the best of all. We cannot forget this beauty. Just as a man refuses to eat what is better after having tasted what is sweet, so we cannot remain with you here.«

⁸ Cf. *N. Arseniev*, *Russian Piety*, The Faith Press and St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1975, p. 86.

The ancient documents of Russian history are full of moving descriptions of this cultic beauty. Thus, as the Russian historian Nicholas Arseniev⁹ affirms, in the middle of the 11th century, in a sermon commemorating the late Prince Vladimir, Metropolitan Ilarion says: »Behold the city gleaming in majesty, behold the churches flourishing, behold the Christian faith increasing, see how the city is sanctified by the holy icons, illuminated, perfumed with incense and resounding with hymns of praise and divine canticles«¹⁰. Cultic beauty became one of the sources of Russia's national consciousness, one of the constituent elements in the concept of »Holy Russia«¹¹. This love of cultic beauty has remained one of the distinctive characteristics of popular Russian psychology throughout the centuries. It is often in these external forms of liturgical beauty that the soul of the people feels itself seized by an inexpressible presence. But this transfiguration of the liturgical beauty is one of the many things that the pious Russian soul has inherited from the rich and glorious Byzance. Because Byzance has never declined, it is still alive, present and illuminates round the world, even if today's situation is completely different from the one of the past.

Christianity cannot exist without Byzantium, it is in the centre of its heart. History, theology, art and liturgy are all a coherent whole and incarnate under the Byzantine phenomenon¹². And yet the liturgical beauty serves only to indicate the nearness of another world — the divine world that is so far superior to ours and is filled with an overpowering presence. Beauty, this »kallos« in Greek, serves only to prepare the soul for this encounter with God. Thus, it is the nearness of the Divine, the contemplation of heavenly beauty and of one's own unworthiness which has inspired this moving canticle sung during the Holy Week: »I behold, O my Lord, Thy banquet chamber magnificently arrayed, but I have no garment to put on that I might enter in...«. One concept which marked the medieval period of the West and also left a deep imprint on the people of Russia was the idea that *Christ is with us* in the guise of a beggar, and accepts our alms and acts of charity in this way¹³. This was a concept, or rather a real and overwhelming *experience*, and sometimes overexaggerated, giving way to many pious legends¹⁴. It also made the words of Mt 25 ring in the hearts of believers and does so down to the present day. I shall stop here. What is the final result of all these facts, as they appear on the background of contemporary life? What is the most important is precisely this Millenium of the Baptism of Russia.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ A. Popov, *Istoziko-Literaturny obzor polem literary*, 1875, p. 395 (in Russian).

¹¹ See the remarkable article by Prof. A. Sodovoyov, »Holy Russia«, *Zbornik russkaya archeolog obshestra v ko-rolevstve* (vol. I), S. H. S., Belgrade 1927.

¹² Cf. V. Pheidias, »Byzantium, Life-Constituencies-Society-Art«, Athens 1985, pp. 2—3 (in Greek).

¹³ Cf. to the legend of the pious Count Thibaud of Champagne and the leper (on Caesarius Heisterbacensis, *Dialogus miraculorum*. Hist. VIII, cap. 31), the story of St Francis of Assisi and the leper (*Celano*, *Legenda Secunda*, Cap V) and other similar legends; cf. also N. Arseniev, *The Image of the Suffering Christ in the Religious Experience of the Middle Ages*, in: *Trudy russkikh rechenikh za granitsey*, Berlin 1923, vol. II (in Russian).

¹⁴ See the chronicle, *Ipatievskaya Letopis*, p. 397 (in Russian).

It is too early to judge or to make any evaluation of this great event, not only for the Russians themselves but for the rest of Christianity. A celebration of an event like the Millennium should be seen from many perspectives. Perspectives which for the present situation are maybe not realistic or are exposed to a great hope for the near future. Therefore, prismatic celebration has one goal and expectation. The facts of the past, the *retour* to the sources of Christianization of the Rus' should also be one of the main references of this Millennium. The date of 988 is not »hazardous«, it is very significant and important for the Rus' as well as for the rest of Orthodoxy today. On the other hand, any polarization of this celebration would be the beginning of a new process, whose horizons will not be so optimistic and joyful. The end should teach us, let us wait for ...

Prophetic and Critical Task for Today

Wherever we live and under whatever conditions, as Orthodox we have to witness our faith. We are, in this respect, prophets announcing the truth on the meaning of our existence. We have to be God's messengers, being sent by Him to the world, to proclaim what is profitable for all human beings meeting their deepest interests. God needs mankind's help and cooperation. He uses our mouth and ourselves as instruments for the establishment of a new order in a society of peace and justice. St Augustine had rightly said that »God created us without asking us; but He does not want to save us without our consent and our cooperation«. The early Christians lived in a completely pagan world, and yet, as the Epistle to Diognetus records, while they were loyal citizens and obedient to the law, they were radiating and communicating their faith either by word or by their living example.

This leads us to another consideration, namely that we have to exercise our capacity of discernment (*diakrisis*), testing and being critical to situations, to persons, to ideas and by evaluating what is wrong and what is right. For this we need wisdom and guidance. St Paul recommended what should be the ideal social behaviour of Christians, advised them to live in that society still pagan, but taking at the same time their distance by scrutinising, analysing and testing what was good or not: »Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect« (Rom 12:2). This Pauline statement may be considered as the charter of the new life in Christ. Here is underlined the importance of what is *εὐάρεστον*. Paul warns not to be drawn by the stream of worldly pressures — *μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε* — everyone wrestling to keep his/her integrity and dignity. In order to attain this end a continuously spiritual renewal is indispensable, a new and fresh mind constitutes the key for choice, for comparison, assessing persons, discerning and circulating ideas, complex situations.

John Chrysostom in a sharp way develops three duties of high sociological significance which are very relevant to our modern times. He asks: »What are sacrifices accepted by God?« In other words: »How can one please God and with what offerings?« In modern languages this takes up the whole issue of membership in the Church: what does it mean in this contemporary history to be a baptized member? »Sacrifice«, he says, »does not

mean to slaughter animals; it is a ›living sacrifice‹. Listen to David: »I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox or bull with horns and hoofs« (Ps 68, 30–31). And again: »Offer God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High« (Ps 50:14).

But what is the meaning of »reasonable sacrificial worship«? This is briefly the spiritual diakonia or service, the life in Christ. As one in God's temple, being served and blessed, whoever it may be, becomes more pious and takes conscience of the sacredness of the place, we have to shape the whole of our life in the same way we worship and consecrate. This can be done by offering God oblations every day and thus becoming priest of our own body and the virtue of our soul. Such is the case when we for instance offer purity, charitable works, meekness, clemency, forbearance. By doing all this, we offer reasonable worship which has nothing to do with the material, visible and bodily sacrifice.

The second point is to try to keep one's identity while living in a pluralistic society and in the midst of so many opposite principles and ideologies. The Church Fathers never encouraged any compromise of our principles or syncretism. Not at all. But to remain steadfast does not mean that we become cynically indifferent or even violent, aggressive and only criticizing and doing nothing positive for the country and society in which we live. The »fashion« of this world, as Paul writes, leans rather towards the earth. It is temporal, uncertain, containing nothing permanent, high, upright, but mostly being falsified and distorted. If therefore you intend to walk rightly, do not leave yourself to be modelled according to the fashion of the present world. »The form of this world is passing away« (1 Cor 7:31). Nothing indeed is stable or solid, but all is temporal. You cannot find in all these earthly things the truth; it is only an exterior façade. It is a misleading mask, containing neither substance nor hypostasis. While earthly things contain only fashion, virtue on the contrary entails no fashion, but contains a natural beauty, not needing any exterior make-up nor embellishment, such things being unstable and futile.

The last point is the realism of the fragility of daily life. St Chrysostom does not ignore human weakness nor that we are children of fallen ancestors. Neither does he underestimate the influence of the social setting nor of opposite winds threatening Christian faith. Never to be near God with God was an easy task. If one wants to live as a true Christian, one has to pay a heavy price. To be a true Christian is, was and will always be costly. In view of the widespread evil, violence, injustice, diabolic forces, neither one must withdraw nor stay away from any commitment by fearing the results of the fight. Everyone has to resist and to refuse any compromise, provided one is well equipped. Nothing is as weak as evil, St Chrysostom writes. Nothing is disappearing so quickly as evil. Renew therefore your being every day. As we do for our houses, repairing them when they become old, do the same on your very being. Did you sin today? Did you wear out your soul? Do not despair neither discourage! Renew your soul by penitence, tears and confession of sin, and with good works. Never cease doing in such way. Be renewed in order to learn the true interests and the will of God. If you succeed in learning this lesson, then you will succeed also in knowing the very nature of daily happenings which means that you will already have entered the way to every virtue.

One may then ask: who ignores the interest and what is the will of God? All those who are attached to the temporary things. Those who absolutize richness and despise poverty;

those who go after exterior glory, seeking power and high posts. Those who think of themselves too much. Those who build wealthy houses, buy rich luxurious tombs, possess a great number of servants. All such people ignore both, their own real interest and the will of God which makes one indivisible entity. Let us remember that God seeks our own interest. And what God wants, this indeed constitutes our own interest as well. What then are these things that God wants? To live in poverty, in humility, despising glory, in continence, not in luxury, but in suffering, not in abundance. But above anything else we must possess a healthy judgement for things around us. If they are not virtuous, at least try to praise virtue. If we do not avoid evil, at least let us try to blame evil. This is a wise procedure because, by entering the way leading to virtue, the moment will come when we shall become doers. For this reason Paul recommends the necessity of »renewal« (*anakainoustai*)¹⁵.

Impact of the Liturgy for a Harmonious Human Society

Looking back on our patristic heritage, we realize that it is not simple coincidence and an accident that all three hierarchs of Cappadocia (St Basil, St Chrysostom and St Gregory) bequeathed to future generations their marvellous liturgical texts. According to various situations, during their episcopacy, they had to fight heretics, neo-platonists and corruption within the Church, deviated monks, schismatics, governors abusing their power, personal opponents and a poor religious life, keeping only exterior customs, but not incarnating the spirit of the faith in their daily life; very soon they felt the paramount importance of a well adapted Eucharistic service. We must remember that many such texts were circulated in those days; each local church succeeded in producing its own liturgy, which shows the wisdom of the Orthodox, respecting universality, catholicity and unity of faith with local culture, aspirations, language and traditions. Because of a defective liturgical practice and ignorant people looking upon it as a precious heritage, but dissociated with a living eucharistic reality, worship became superficial, stagnant, immobile and a dead act. It was not enough to attend, to assist; one had to participate actively. «Liturgy», so the Fathers were saying, »is not a treasure kept in a museum, but a living reality, a visible holiness, a real communion with God«. «It seeks», St Basil openly said, »education of piety and infusion of power« (*dynamis*)¹⁶. And although he was respecting the liturgical tradition he introduced changes for the benefit of the congregation »One«, he said, »must through liturgy listen to the voice of the Spirit«¹⁷. »Thus we seek good beyond this earth, being enabled to silence our low passions«¹⁸.

Writing to the clergy of Neocaesarea in Asia Minor, St Gregory for the defence of his reformation and liturgical changes showed, as St Ambrose was doing in the West, that

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, In Epist. ad Rom. Hom. 20, 1—2: PG 60, 595—598.

¹⁶ Basil the Great, De Spiritu Sancto, 27: PG 32, 185—188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Homily to I Psalm: PG 29, 212b.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, col 213.

St Basil was above all seeing the deepest interest of the people, of the worshipping community¹⁹. His opponents were fanatic monks and clergy, accusing him of radical innovations, of composing new hymns and prayers. In a letter St Basil put the general principles of true public prayers which, while they converged with the transmitted tradition, had always to remember the emerging needs and variety of situations and places. If one typical form was imposed upon all, the others (Libyans, Palestinians, Arabs, Phenicians, Syrians and all who lived around the Euphrates) would remain indifferent and follow different forms of worship. There existed a pluralism in worship which had to correspond to needs of the people expressing their particularities and physiognomy. Gregory the Theologian states that St Basil, in view of deplorable ignorance and spiritual needs, was composing continuously occasional prayers for every need, instructive ordinances as to the ecclesiastical order, thus preventing confusion and incoherent celebrations²⁰.

From the importance attributed to eucharistic texts by the three hierarchs, one can see the degree of impact on the religious life and consequently on the social and personal relationships, because one lives as one prays. The prayer expresses a spiritual level and demands a similar behaviour. One cannot be worshipping in the Church and at the same time lead a completely contradictory way of life, denying what one was singing. By so doing, one would betray the whole spirit of a prayerful moment. In addition, liturgy does not only influence a single person's life, but makes us a community of worshippers, a body, a family, a real synaxis, a perfect society and a sacred koinonia. Whoever speaks of the ideal »socialization«, fraternization, brotherhood, universality of people, collectivity and human community, must think of the role of liturgy which transforms, unites, redeems and saves. Worship therefore does not only concern a particular person, it is not a private affair, but a concern of the whole ecclesiastical *pleroma*. Thus, the problem of liturgy becomes a problem of the whole Church since it prepares the mystical body, the kingdom of God. One cannot expect improved religious life and liturgical renewal only by sporadic changes here and there, or by spectacular congresses, overstating too often change for the sake of change; but only if they are parallel, they change the attitudes and relations to God and with the others. Very refreshing and relevant was the liturgical unity in the early Church life. In the Apostolic Constitutions²¹ one sees the unanimity of all the Apostles in Antioch composing one harmonious text, dictating it to Clement, thus establishing a tradition aiming at the reformation and renewal of the whole community.

Christ transfigures the society and does not invite the world to give Christianity a face lift — a face more compatible with the false conception and pagan errors of that deluded world. This is an age of inconsistencies and contradictions. Orthodoxy does not intend — following the attitude of the Fathers — to advocate mere condemnation of the society at this age, but its conversion, redemption and ultimate transfiguration. To achieve this there must be a radical re-education in the Patristic writings, not by abundant quotations, incoherent, scattered, and offered as such in a monotonous and tiring way. We have to

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Epist. 207: PG 32, 760—761.

²⁰ Gregory the Theologian, Oratio 43, 34: PG 36, 541.

²¹ Cf. *Apostolic Constitutions*, VIII, 4.

see things as the Fathers themselves were seeing, feeling and experiencing them. Behind liturgical ceremonies lie saving realities, principles, doctrines and redeeming states of our whole being. No one can touch the field of Orthodox liturgy who does not see that the reason why it causes such an effect is that it signifies so much. Thus John Chrysostom, aware of the spiritual »anemia« of many believers in Constantinople, pointed out that the eucharistic communion is not a static formality but that it hides a dynamic character: »After having received the communion, you depart as violent lions and become the terror against the demons. This blood purifies the whole world. It enables us to master and dominate all kinds of passion; until when then shall we remain unconscious and in apathy?«²²

The Transforming Power

The Church, in its dynamic liturgical force and power, shows its identity, but this power is not of this world. It does not exist in order to replace secular power and to enter in an antagonistic process or to become a rival institution. Its mission consists, under whatever condition and political regime it may be, in helping people to remember that the purpose of life is not only bread, work and enjoyment. It helps all of us to stand upright and not to fall down, not to be degraded by worshipping modern idols. And if we happen to fall down, then it helps us to stand up again, being restored, healed, renewed, thus continuing the march strengthened. Its role consists in penetrating into the deepest part of our being what nobody else can do. We know from experience that inner conflicts and all kinds of evil surrounding us cannot be removed by human precepts or psychoanalysis, an »auto-therapy« or »auto-soteria«. We need an external therapy beyond human power, coming rather from above, an intervention by God's transcendence. Then the family will become more healthy, a real family and not a parody, its members disrespecting each other. Then the society will find a purpose for real progress, for life, a purpose in this chaotic world. Then only each one's own existence will be meaningful.

This important mission is carried out above anything else through worship and eucharistic communion. The Church Fathers repeatedly remind us that during the liturgy we do not only feel uplifted, but we are already experiencing that other world reality for which we are created. As Orthodox we are concerned not only in attending by habit religious services, kissing icons and all traditional rituals, however useful these may be, but mainly by having a full and deep relationship with Christ including the Holy Trinity and the »koinonia« of the Saints; not »Christianity but...«, or »Christianity plus...«. Gregory Nazianzus said that often »we limit our participation in public worship to being pre-occupied with earthly petitions, asking continuously for success of affairs, for health, for wealth, for penitence and forgetting *doxology*, the element of praise in prayer and in our lives. Thanksgiving is so rare and weak. Where has praise gone? This absence results in lack of joy, strength and reliability of true spirituality. Most of our people deny this dynamics and tonic and see everywhere problems. We are so terrified of being accused

²² John Chrysostom, Homily in John, 46: PG 59, 260–261.

of escapism, of the irrelevance of mystery and beauty in a harsh and rationalistic age that had we been on Mount Tabor, we would have surely said: »No thanks, Lord, not today« instead of »It is well, Master, we are here« (Luke 9:33). Orthodox liturgy, especially when living in a secular setting, has not lost its credibility for modern mankind. On the contrary, this liturgy fascinates, captivates, impresses and attracts so many outsiders, atheists and agnostics who are questioning their place in the disorder of this world. There is no age so cruel, cold and evil that a glimpse of the heavenly would not alleviate its suffering and become an instrument for the deification of mankind. Nor is there so peaceful, placid, contented and prosperous a time that such a glimpse would not stand as a rebuke to complacency and an inspiration to a more spiritual way of life.

More than in the past modern human beings search for »real life«, for »Zoe« rather than for »Bios«. This challenging and existential question is with us like a sickness, we talk about getting back to essentials and attempt to engage ourselves in a neurotic activism which we take to be real. And after how many disillusionings, disappointments and agonies! The erosion caused by a desacralized and materialistic society has made us forget the reality of spiritual things. The modern world teaches us that such things are irrelevant. We talk too much about God, writing countless books on God, and yet we insist to live without God by and for our feelings. We have now become slaves of our feelings and emotions and we think that life is made of such transitory, fickle stuff. If we live for our earthly and selfish feelings we shall never know real love. There is no other way than the narrow way, the way of the Cross, of renouncing all and following Christ. There is no joy, but the fulness of joy in His presence. True Orthodoxy is very far from an observance of rules and canons. It is in no way considered as a suppressive or as a moral code, but it is a *personal* »koinonia«-relationship, the person of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. John Chrysostom reminds us: »While Baptism brings us the mystical birth and the remission of all sins, to remain onwards pure and unspoiled depends on our will and degree of vigilance«²³.

If the Church Fathers were before us, they could disapprove the actual conspiracy of silence on spiritual things. This does not mean that we must become shy, unpleasant and severe, but shining with joy. This joy is expressed by Ephrem the Syrian who, although being a monk, was radiating with joy: »I have invited you, Lord, to a wedding feast of song, but the wine, the utterance of praise at our feast has failed«²⁴. We must remember the Church as the bridge between earth and heaven — a phrase of the liturgist, St Germain patriarch of Constantinople —, our prayer represents a window into heaven. St Symeon the New Theologian invites the communicants to feel the joy but also the awe, reverence and compunction, familiarity and fear: »Rejoicing at once and trembling, I who am straw receive the Fire, and, strange wonder, I am ineffably refreshed as the bush of old which burned yet was not consumed.« Gregory the Theologian will develop this intimate link of union with Christ »that a complete communication will be established. Then God is contacting gods — Theos theois enoumenos«²⁵.

²³ *Ibid.*, Homily in John, 10, 2: PG 59, 76.

²⁴ *Ephrem the Syrian*, *The Harp of the Spirit*, London 1975, p. 18.

²⁵ *Gregory the Theologian*, *Oratio* 45, 3: PG 36, 628.

The Fathers invite us today to seek more knowledge about faith and apply this in our lives, to draw closer to Christ. Each one must seek what is authentic, full and orthodox in the praxis. They refuse minimalism. They do not want a castrated faith. There is no room for compromise. Orthodoxy involves the whole of man, body, mind and soul. In the Liturgy of Chrysostom it is said: »The fervour of faith, full of the Holy Ghost«. Consequently, there must be fervour, enthusiasm, engendered by our acts of an askesis.

Unfortunately if we proceed to a self-criticism, we shall see how living prayer is absent among many. Singing in rich choirs, yes, but inner prayer is conspicuous by its absence. Mystical ascension is dissipated. There is not enough spiritual food to sustain prayer, holy joy, *agalliasis*. We must stop *talking* about it and start *doing* it. Somebody said: »If we are too busy to pray, we are too busy«. And then worship must not be seen as an isolated occasional act, but a continuous link, involving all our being. Orthodoxy is interwoven in our worship. We sing what we believe, what we confess. There is personal holiness, the very diapason of the Fathers. It is strange that at an age which is concerned about the »social«, one seems to forget that a community is made up of individuals. If we forget the »person«, we will not arrive at real brotherhood, fellowship, deep koinonia. It is not an extravagant claim to say it was Patristics that produced and developed our modern understanding of »person«. The Latin word »persona« means »mask« or »legally responsible individual«, but through the Christological debates and Trinitarian writings the Church fashioned the fuller meaning »person« we have today.

Yes, the Cappadocian Fathers insist that we are a body, referring to the Pauline teaching. We are an organism but made up of *persons* and of their personal commitments. The entire faith is given to each one. Each one is responsible for the whole faith, and the whole people of God (Laos tou Theou) is the guardian (phylax) of the Christian message. Renewal and repentance (metanoia) start with each person and not at spectacular movements and conferences only.

Do not keep the faith bottled up inside yourself. Revival or awakening starts from within, but it does not stay there. If we continue to fail in respect of these reflections of the Church Fathers, then there will be an Orthodoxy and it will only exist by name. Some may say that such thoughts, written fifteen centuries ago, are merely to »put the clock back« — a sad phrase. It is rather the peculiar mark of a rationalistic, overdefining society which preaches the »pastness of the past«. The remark of St Basil of Caesarea must be repeated again and again that only »the person who has been integrated to the divinity of the Spirit will acquire a spirit capable to gaze the great divine visions and look at the divine beauties«²⁶.

²⁶ Basil the Great, Epist. ad Anphilochium Iconium: PG 32, 86.

