

Is There An Invisible Church?

by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky

Western Protestantism, broken into a hundred sects and denominations, naturally had to come to the question: Where is the true church in the midst of all these divisions? And it has found no other way than to come to a teaching of an "invisible church" that mysteriously exists in the midst of all the differences and mistakes and sins of men—a church that is holy, whose membership is known only to God, and that consists only of those who are worthy of being in it.

However, it is not for nothing that our Divine Savior has left us parables: the parable of the net that brings to shore not only good fish, but also bad; the parable of the field in which the owner leaves the tares to grow together with the good wheat until the harvest. The apostles founded the Church through the visible Mystery of Baptism of all who declared to them their faith in Christ, and the Church was, as it remains, a net or field "for those who wish to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth," for those who seek eternal life but for the time being live "in hope," not yet having entered into heavenly repose.

The Apostles founded outwardly "visible" communities with a definite membership, one in soul even though outwardly separated, and all these communities were the single Church of Christ. Such will the Church remain forever. Its aim is to call and prepare men for eternal life in Christ.

Therefore, the Orthodox Apostolic Church, for its part, replies: Such an invisible Church which, in the midst of many confessional divisions or above them, would single out the worthy people from among them and would unit them all—does not exist.

But nevertheless, this does not in the least mean that we Orthodox Christians do not believe in an Invisible Church. If we did not, we would not pronounce daily, and even several times a day, both in Divine services and in prayer at home, the words "I believe" in the Creed with regard to the Church; faith, in the definition of the Apostle, is "the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). To the three following and final subjects of the Creed we apply the words "I confess" and "I look for" ...This means that in our teaching on the Church we acknowledge also its invisible sphere. Where and what is it?

This sphere is the Heavenly Church.

When we talk about the Church, and in our written discussions of it, we often, as it were, forget about this sphere, and by this very fact we lessen the spiritual power; we lose the grace-giving seed which is contained in the Orthodox understanding of the being and essence of the Church. And therefore our talk about the Church, the earthly Church, in the present period which is so difficult for faith, often evokes sorrow rather than giving consolation. Restricting our ideas about faith to the earthly sphere alone, we thereby impoverish ourselves. This can be felt especially now when, on the one hand, the local Orthodox Churches are becoming isolated (from each other) in their earthly relations, and possibly deeper divisions lie ahead; and on the other hand, attempts are being made to form "one church" on earth on principles totally foreign to the Orthodox consciousness. It is not a cold, abstract recognition of the invisible Heavenly Church that we need; rather, with all our soul we must think and feel ourselves to be members of the "Church of the called" in living and active communion with the "Church of the chosen."

For in this also is to be found in part our chosenness—not our personal, individual chosenness, but the chosenness of Orthodoxy among the Christian confessions.

When, in the last century, the Protestant spirit began to penetrate into Russian society, and in some places also into the simple people, our church writers had set before them the aim of opposing to the above-mentioned alien view of the Church the Orthodox teaching that in the midst of all the divisions in Christianity the Church on earth is one and unique. It was explained that the essential, logically clear, and natural attributes of the Church had to be, and were, the uninterruptedness of the hierarchy, coming from the Holy Apostles, and the teaching of faith, confessed and kept without change. Such are the outward signs that are understandable for everyone: such is the Orthodox Eastern Church. Thus the question was limited and answered by the teaching about the Church on earth.

The question of the Church has become a real one in our days also, but now it has a broader scope. Although the "ecumenical movement" of recent times is occupied not with the question of the unity of faith, but with the aim of participating in the proposed plan of an epochal reconstruction of human society—still, sooner or later, the question of the foundations and scope of Christian faith in this attempt at union will have to arise. It is our obligation to show why this movement cannot be justified. But we ourselves will not be completely justified if we descend from the breadth of the Orthodox world-view, with all its fullness, to a narrow platform of conceptions and, most importantly, to Western conceptions of the Church.

At one time it was permissible and harmless for the representatives of our church history and theology when entering dialogue with Protestantism, to descend to its narrow platform: but in present circumstances this is no longer justified.

Even if a reply were not demanded of us to a movement that is passing us by, that is off to the side of us—still, it is always more consoling for us to acknowledge that we are under the protection of a great heavenly choir of saints, than it is to forget about this...

"Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43)—the holy words pronounced on Golgotha. Paradise! Is this not a forgotten word? After the third chapter of Genesis it is not heard in the Old Testament Scripture. A cherubim with a bared sword was placed to guard the entrance into Paradise. But on the day of Golgotha its gates were opened: "The Cherubim steps away from the tree of life, and the flaming weapon turns to flight." The Old Testament righteous ones, the departed first Christian martyrs entered into the Kingdom of Christ in the heavens. With the course of decades and centuries, the granary of the Lord began to be filled, after the Apostles, with the ranks of martyrs and confessors, hierarchs, ascetics and righteous ones. The Church of the saints lives a life of blessedness in God, with prayers of praise and thanksgiving: and since "love never faileth" (I Cor. 13:8), these are joined by prayers for the brethren on earth. And we also ask their prayers for us and for our close ones who are departed. These prayers, as an expression of spiritual closeness, are intertwined in all directions, drawing heaven near to earth. Indeed, how can we not feel the closeness of heavenly and earthly things, when we so desire the blessed life for our close departed ones and entreat the Savior in prayer for them?

Furthermore, the Orthodox Christian, if he has a living bond with his Church, constantly sees and hears in church and at home reminders of the Invisible Church of the saints, and his soul is in constant contact with thoughts about it. He received in infancy, at his baptism, a Christian name, the name of a saint, and he feels himself especially close to this saint and his personal prayer entreats the saint to pray to God for him. He looks into his usual calendar, and before his eyes is a monthly list, filled with the names of the saints of all periods of Christianity. He enters the church, and before his eyes there appears another world, the heavenly world fixed in images in the icons, on the iconostasis, on the walls, often in the very peak of the dome.

The Vespers service, beginning with the glorification of the Most Holy Trinity, immediately directs his thoughts to the Kingdom of Christ by the call to come together and worship its Head, "Christ Himself, our King and God," and further, the whole service is penetrated with the remembrance of the saints, and especially of the Most Holy Theotokos. In the shortest litany, "Again and again"—which is said nearly ten times in a feast-day Vigil—we are reminded to "call to remembrance the Most Holy, Most Pure, Most Blessed, glorious Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints," and in such an awareness to commit ourselves and one another to Christ God.

When giving a prosphora for commemoration in the Altar at the Proskomedia before the Liturgy, the Christian who has ever heard an explanation of the Liturgy knows that the particles taken out of the prosphora will be placed on the sacred paten amidst the particles "for the living and the dead" below the set of particles which symbolically represent the whole Church of Christ: in the center the Lamb of God, and on the sides one particle in honor of the Theotokos, and other particles in memory of all the saints in their nine ranks. So close to us is the Heavenly Church that we confide to it all our sorrows, weaknesses, falls, griefs, and joys: we express love for it: we ask its prayers and its help for us.

Such is the spiritual world which is accessible to us even if we live in the usual church parish. Multiply this possibility for those who live in a monastery, and especially for priests or deacons who frequently serve in the Altar, or for those who are assigned to the cliros. It turns out that in the Orthodox Church communion with the saints, with the Invisible Church, can be more intimate than with, the world that surrounds us outside the church building; for many it is indeed such.

But is a really earthly communion with the whole earthly Church, dispersed in various nations and states, possible for us? Indeed, within one and the same church parish, does any religious, spiritual communion occur outside the church building? In vain do people lullaby themselves, dreaming of a "fullness" of communion and unity of the whole Christian world on earth.

In our Orthodox Church, however, communion of soul and mind, all our striving, everything is directed to the Heavenly Church, so that it, being invisible, becomes almost visible, and from the distance of the heavenly heights becomes the closest thing to us.

Earth and heaven are a single Church of Christ. This is a Church more complete than any other one that might be organized, even though one might call together and bind with a single name all the varieties of present-day societies and churches which belong to historical Christianity outside the Church, outside of Orthodoxy.

But isn't our communion with the Heavenly Church one sided? Does it give benefit to the soul? The saints hear us in the same way one soul hears another. And more than this: on earth the contact between people through the bodily organs of sense somewhat impedes and hinders the immediate communion of souls, but in the heavenly-earthly sphere this communion is free. In this sphere our voice, our words, reading and singing in the work of prayer are necessary for ourselves, for our sake, so as to unite two or three of us or a whole church into a single common soul, "That with a single heart we may hymn" God and His saints.

It is said of earthly relationships: "Tell me who your friends are, and I'll tell you who you are." "A man learns from the company he keeps"—whether for good or ill. Is it not so also in the purely spiritual sphere? The Apostle John the Theologian instructs in his catholic epistle, which is for all Christians, including ourselves: "I write (the Gospel, the Epistles, the Apocalypse) that ye also may have fellowship with us, and truly, our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3). He writes this, being in great old age, giving us his testament that men live in common love. The chief of the Apostles writes: "I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance (to prepare yourselves for a free entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord) ... knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shown me. Moreover I will endeavor that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance" (II Peter 1:13, 15).

However, in speaking of a single heavenly earthly Church, do we not confuse two distinct spheres? We do not confuse them, but only confess their union: "Having accomplished for us Thy mission and united things on earth with things in heaven, Thou didst ascend into glory, O Christ our God, being nowhere separated from those who love thee, but remaining ever-present with us and calling: I am with you and no one is against you" (Kontakion of the Ascension). The Canonical epistle of the Eastern Patriarchs in the 17th century expresses the truth of the unity of the Church in the words: "Two flocks of a single Pastor." And so do we believe...

But why did the Fathers of the Church at the Councils not raise the question of the Heavenly Church, but by the word "Church" always had in mind its existence on earth? And why in their works does one have to "search out" the passages where they ascend to the thoughts of the heavenly sphere, giving it the name of "Church"?

This is because they were entrusted with shepherding the earthly flock of Christ: all their thoughts, all their effort and care, concern the ordering and service of what had been entrusted to them—the preservation of the faith and the ordering of the earthly sphere of the Church. But their service was illuminated and received power by the constant awareness of being in the single ecumenical heavenly-earthly Kingdom or Body of Christ.