

## **The Inward Mission of Our Church: Bringing About Orthodoxy**

*by Blessed Father Justin Popovich*

It is very, very difficult indeed for infinite and eternal life to make its way into the human soul—so narrow—and even into the narrower human body. Held behind bars, the inhabitants of this earth suspiciously stand their ground against anything coming from without. Cast into this prison of time and space they are unable—from atavism or perhaps from inertia—to bear being penetrated by something outlasting time, outlying space, something which surpasses these, and is eternal. Such an invasion is considered to be aggression towards them and they respond with war. A man, given the fact that he is being corrupted by the "moth" of time, does not like the intrusion of eternity into his life and is not easily able to adapt himself to it. He often considers this intrusion to be sheer unforgivable insolence. At certain times he might become a hardened rebel against eternity because in the face of it he perceives his own minuteness; at others he even experiences fierce hatred towards it because he views it through such a human prism, one that is all too earthbound, all too worldly. Plunged bodily into matter, bound by the force of gravity to time and space, and having his spirit quite divorced from eternity, the worldweary man takes no pleasure in those arduous expeditions towards the eternal, toward what lies beyond. The chasm existing between time and eternity is quite unbridgeable for him because he lacks the strength and ability needed to get across it. Thoroughly besieged by death, he covers with scorn all those who say to him, "Man is immortal; he is eternal." Immortal in just what respect? In his mortal body? In what respect eternal? With respect to his feeble spirit?

In order for a person to be immortal he must, at the very core of his sense of self, feel himself immortal. For him to be eternal, in his center of consciousness of self he must know himself eternal. Without doing this, for him both immortality and eternity alike will be conditions imposed from the outside. And if at one time man did have this sense of immortality and awareness of eternity, he had it so long ago that it has since wasted away under the weight of death. And waste away it really has; we learn this from the whole mysterious makeup of human beings. Our whole problem lies in how we might rekindle that extinguished feeling, how we might revive the wasted-away awareness. Human beings are not in a position to do this; nor, indeed, are the "transcendent gods" of philosophy. It is something to be done by God, who incarnated His immortal Self inside man's sense of himself and incarnated His eternal Self within man's self-awareness. Christ did precisely this when He was made man and became God-human. Only in Christ, in Him alone, did man feel himself immortal and know himself eternal. Christ God-human, in His Person, bridged that chasm between time and eternity and restored relations between them. For this reason only he who is organically made one with Christ God-human, one with His Body, the Church, can be the one to feel himself really immortal and know himself in truth to be eternal. Whereby, for man and humanity, Christ composes the one and only passage and transition from time to eternity. This is why in the Church, the Orthodox Church, Christ became and remained the one and only way and the single guide from the former to the latter, from the sense of one's own mortality to the sense of one's immortality, from self-awareness of what is transient to self-awareness of what is eternal and without dimension.

The ever-living personality of God-human Christ is precisely the Church. The Church is always personality, God-human body and spirit. The definition of the Church, Her life, Her purpose, Her spirit, Her plan, Her ways, all these are given in the wondrous Person of God-human Christ. Hence, the mission

of the Church is to make every one of her faithful, organically and in person, one with the Person of Christ; to turn their sense of self into a sense of Christ, and their self-knowledge (self-awareness) into Christ-knowledge (Christ-awareness); for their life to become the life in Christ and for Christ; their personality to become personality in Christ and for Christ; that within them might live not they themselves but Christ in them (Gal. 2:10). The mission of the Church is still to bring about in her members the conviction that the proper state of human personhood is composed of immortality and eternity and not of the realm of time and mortality...and the conviction that man is a wayfarer who is wending his way in the sway of time and mortality towards immortality and all eternity.

The Church is God-human, eternity incarnated within the boundaries of time and space. She is here in this world but she is not of this world (John 18:36). She is in the world in order to raise it on high where she herself has her origin. The Church is ecumenical, catholic, God-human, ageless, and it is therefore a blasphemy—an unpardonable blasphemy against Christ and against the Holy Ghost—to turn the Church into a national institution, to narrow her down to petty, transient, time-bound aspirations and ways of doing things. Her purpose is beyond nationality, œcumenical, all-embracing: to unite all men in Christ, all without exception to nation or race or social strata. "There is neither Greek nor Jew, their is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), because "Christ is all, and in all." The means and methods of this all-human God-human union of all in Christ have been provided by the Church, through the holy sacraments and in her God-human works (ascetic exertions, virtues). And so it is: in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist the ways of Christ and the means of uniting all people are composed and defined and integrated. Through this mystery, man is made organically one with Christ and with all the virtues: faith, prayer, fasting, love, meekness, through compassion and giving alms, a man consolidates in this union and preserves himself in its sanctity, personally experiencing Christ both as the unity of his personality and as the essence of his union with other members of the body of Christ, the Church.

The Church is the personhood of the God-human Christ, a God-human organism and not a human organization. The Church is indivisible, as is the person of the God-human, as is the body of the God-human. For this reason it is a fundamental error to have the God-human organism of the Church divided into little national organizations. In the course of their procession down through history many local Churches have limited themselves to nationalism, to national methods and aspirations, ours being among them. The Church has adapted herself to the people when it should properly be just the reverse: the people adapting themselves to the Church. This mistake has been made many times by our Church here. But we very well know that these were the "tares" of our Church life, tares which the Lord will not uproot, leaving them rather to grow with the wheat until the time of harvest (Matt. 13, 29-30). We also well know (the Lord so taught us) that these tares have their origin in our primeval enemy and enemy of Christ: the devil (Matt. 13, 25-28). But we wield this knowledge in vain if it is not transformed into prayer, the prayer that in time to come Christ will safeguard us from becoming the sowers and cultivators of such tares ourselves.

It is now high time—the twelfth hour—time for our Church representatives to cease being nothing but the servants of nationalism and for them to become bishops and priests of the One, Holy Catholic, and Apostolic Church. The mission of the Church, given by Christ and put into practice by the Holy Fathers, is this: that in the soul of our people be planted and cultivated a sense and awareness that every member of the Orthodox Church is a Catholic Person, a person who is for ever and ever, and is God-human; that each person is Christ's, and is therefore a brother to every human being, a ministering servant to all men

and all created things. This is the Christ-given objective of the Church. Any other is not an objective of Christ but of the Antichrist. For our local Church to be the Church of Christ, the Church Catholic, this objective must be brought about continuously among our people. And yet what are the means of accomplishing this God-human objective? Once again, the means are themselves God-human because a God-human objective can only be brought about exclusively by God-human means, never by human ones or by any others. It is on this point that the Church differs radically from anything which is human or of this earth.

These means are none other than the God-human ascetic exertions and virtues. And these can be successfully practiced only by God-human, Christ-bearing ascetics. God-human virtues exist in an organic kinship. Each has its source in the other and they bring one another to completion.

First among the ascetic virtues is the effort of faith: The souls of our people must pass through, and constantly be passing through, this exertion; meaning that these souls may then be given up to Christ as having no reservations and being without compromises; having extended down to the God-human depths and ascended to the God-human heights. It is essential to create in our people the sense that the faith of Christ is a virtue beyond nationhood, being œcumenical and catholic, trinitarian; and that for someone to believe in Christ entails their waiting on Christ, and only on Christ, with every event of their lives.

The second ascetic virtue is the God-human virtue of prayer and fasting: This being a virtue which must become the way of life of our Orthodox people, becoming the souls of their souls, because prayer and fasting are the all-powerful, Christ-given means of purging not only the human personhood but also society, the people, and the human race at large, of every defilement. It is prayer and fasting which are able to cleanse our people's souls from our defilements and sinning (Mt. 17:19-21; Lk. 9:17-29). The souls of our people must fall in step with the orthodox life of prayer. Prayer and fasting are not to be performed merely for the individual, or for one people, but for everyone and everything ("in all and for all"), for friends and enemies, for those who persecute us and those who put us to death, because that is how Christians are to be distinguished from the Gentiles (Mt. 5: 44-45).

The third God-human virtue is that of love: That love which knows no bounds, which does not question who is worthy and who is not, but loves them all; loving friends and enemies, loving sinners and evildoers, without however loving their sins and their crimes. It blesses the accursed, as the sun does, it shines both on the evil and the good (Matt. 5: 44-46). This God-human love must be cultivated in our people because its catholic character is what sets it apart from other self-proclaimed and relative loves: from that of the pharisaic sort, the humanist, the altruistic, the nationalist, and likewise from animal love. The love of Christ is all-embracing love, always. By prayer it is acquired because it is a gift of Christ. Now the Orthodox heart prays with intensity: Lord of love, this love of Thine for everyone and for all things—give it to me!

The fourth ascetic virtue is the God-human virtue of meekness and humility. Only he who is meek at heart can appease fierce hearts that are in uproar: only he who is lowly in heart can humble proud and haughty souls. To be "showing all meekness unto all men" (Tit. 3:2). But a person becomes truly meek and humble when he turns his heart of hearts into the Lord Jesus, humble and meek, He being the only true "meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). The soul of the person must be rendered meek by Christ's

meekness. Every person must learn to pray: Meek, gentle Lord, assuage my fierce soul! The Lord humbled himself with the greatest humility—he was incarnate and became a man. Should you be of Christ, then humble yourself as a worm: embed your flesh in the pain of all who are in pain, of everyone sorrowing and in grief; in the trial of everyone who, impassioned, is thus tormented; and in the trauma of every animal and bird. Humble yourself lower than them all: be all things to all men, but be of Christ and according to Christ. When you are by yourself, then pray: O humble Lord, by your humility, humble me!

The fifth ascetic virtue is the God-human virtue of patience and humility: Which is to say, to endure ill-use, not to render evil for evil, to forgive in total compassion all assault, slander and hurt. This is what it is to be of Christ: to feel yourself perpetually crucified to the world, persecuted by it, violated and spat upon. The world will not tolerate Christ-bearing men just as it would not tolerate Christ. Martyrdom is the state in which a Christian brings forth fruit. This must be imparted to our people. For the Orthodox, martyrdom is purification. Being Christian does not simply mean to bear suffering cheerfully, but to pardon in compassion those who cause it, to pray to God for them as did Christ and the archdeacon Stephen. And so, pray: Long-suffering Lord, give me forbearance, make me magnanimous and meek! Our Church's mission is to infuse these God-human virtues and ascetic exertions into the people's way of living; to have their life and soul knit firm with the Christ-like God-human virtues. For therein lies salvation from the world and from all those soul-destroying, death-dealing, and Godless organizations of the world. In response to the "erudite" atheism and refined cannibalism of contemporary civilization we must give place to those Christ-bearing personalities, who with the meekness of sheep will put down the roused lust of wolves, and with the harmlessness of doves will save the soul of the people from cultural and political putrefaction. We must execute ascetic effort in Christ's name in response to the cultural exercising which is performed in the name of the decayed and disfigured European being, in the name of atheism, civilization, or the Antichrist. Which is why the major task of our Church is the creation of such Christ-bearing ascetics. The watchword which should be heard within our Church today is: Let us return to the Christ-bearing ascetics and to the Holy Fathers! To resume the virtues of Saint Anthony, Saint Athanasios, Saint Basil, and Saint Gregory, of Saints Sergios and Seraphim of the Russians, of Saints Savva, Prochios, and Gabriel of the Serbs, and others like them because it was these God-human virtues which brought about Saint Anthony, Saint Gregory and Saint Savva. And today only Orthodox ascetic efforts and virtues can bring about sanctity in every soul, in the soul of all our people—seeing that the God-human objective of the Church is unalterable and its means are likewise so, since Christ is the same yesterday, today and unto all ages (Heb. 13:8). Herein lies the difference between the world of men and the one in Christ: the human world is transient and time-bound, whilst that of Christ is ever whole, for evermore. Orthodoxy, as the single vessel and guardian of the perfect and radiant Person of God-human Christ, is brought about exclusively by this extension of virtues by grace, through entirely God-human Orthodox means, not through borrowings from Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, because the latter are forms of Christianity after the pattern of the proud European being, and not of the humble God-human being.

This mission of the Church is facilitated by God Himself because among our people there exists an ascetic spirit as created by Orthodoxy through the centuries. The Orthodox soul of our people leans towards the Holy Fathers and the Orthodox ascetics. Ascetic exertion, at the personal, family, and parish level, particularly of prayer and fasting, is the characteristic of Orthodoxy. Our people is a people of Christ, an Orthodox people, because—as Christ did—it sums up the Gospel in these two virtues: prayer

and fasting. And it is a people convinced that all defilement, all foul thoughts, can be driven out of man by these alone (Matt. 17:21). In its heart of hearts our people know Christ and Orthodoxy, they know just what it is that makes an Orthodox person Orthodox. Orthodoxy will always generate ascetic rebirth. She recognizes no other.

The ascetics are Orthodoxy's only missionaries. Asceticism is her only missionary school. Orthodoxy is ascetic effort and it is life, and it is thus by effort and by life that her mission is broadcast and brought about. The development of asceticism...this ought to be the inward mission of our Church amongst our people. The parish must become an ascetic focal point. But this can only be achieved by an ascetic priest. Prayer and fasting, the Church-oriented life of the parish, a life of liturgy: Orthodoxy holds these as the primary ways of effecting rebirth in its people. The parish, the parish community, must be regenerated and in Christ-like and brotherly love must minister humbly to Him and to all people, meek and lowly and in a spirit of sacrifice and self-denial. And such service must be imbued and nourished by prayers and the liturgical life. This much is groundwork and indispensable. But to this end there exists one prerequisite: that our bishops, priests, and our monks become ascetics themselves. That this might be, then: Let us beseech the Lord.

*From Divine Ascent, Number 1 (Great Lent, 1997), pp. 21-27.*