

Archive 1998

"Mere Christianity"

Variation on a Theme by Fr Gregory



The Holy Fathers of Nicaea

The great Anglican writer C.S. Lewis once wrote a book in defence of orthodox (small "o") Christianity called "Mere Christianity." Here was a man, an intellectual, an agnostic, whose conversion to Christ made a profound impact on his sceptical contemporaries. His continuing appeal to old and young alike, (remember the "Narnia" stories?) witnesses to the power of the authentic Christian gospel in all its fullness. "Mere" Christianity was, of course, a deeply ironic title. For Lewis, orthodox Christianity was simply, Christianity. In England we have a TV commercial for a well known brand of wholemeal bread which plays on northern sensibilities. This is bread, (so we are told), with "now't taken out." This was Lewis precisely and is perhaps true of many if not most converts. We want Christianity with "now't taken out." This is Orthodoxy; to use Lewis' words, "mere Christianity."

We must confess, though, that this is not how many other Christians perceive Orthodoxy. If get they can get through its cultural opacity, (mercifully less opaque now in the West), the first reaction of some is "gosh ... how can you do all that?!" For a generation, (generations more like), brought up on instant this and instant that, Orthodoxy must see a very long hill to climb. Sometimes the clericalism of the West prompts some to "blame" Orthodox clergy. A Baptist relation of one of our parishioners referred to my "heavy shepherding." He was of course referring to his mother's highly committed Orthodox Christian lifestyle; too strong seemingly even for Baptist tastes! It seems beyond belief that Orthodox Christians could actually *want* to fast, confess their sins, worship beyond the "allotted hour," and yes, even sacrifice their lives for Christ. A sort of profound respect is engendered, but repulsion as well. The cost is just too great to contemplate.

Probably the strongest impact on those encountering Orthodoxy for the first time, (after the worship), is the veneration of martyrdom. "Martyr", of course, is Greek for witness. We witness through sacrifice. This sacrifice may involve our physical death or perhaps the martyrdom of the monastic calling. Equally, such sacrifice may require a self-denying witness to the gospel life in the midst of the world and its daily concerns. Whatever the form or expression of martyrdom, it is the paradigm of mere Christianity, of Orthodoxy. The litmus test of our repentance is whether we are prepared to step out in faith and give all to the Kingdom.

If this seems too strong for some weak stomachs; if "now't taken out" means too much left in then we can only mourn the dissipation of much so-called Christianity in our time. The faith of our fathers and mothers, the Orthodox faith of the Church is not some dry recitation of a creed; it is a living out in the flesh of that creed in all its fulness requiring nothing less than the total surrender of our lives. That many Orthodox Christians are still prepared joyfully to do this, is probably the greatest hymn of praise to Christ that can ever be offered. Their "mere Christianity" will change the world. Their "mere Christianity" is the death-destroying resurrection life of Christ; Christianity with "now't taken out.!"

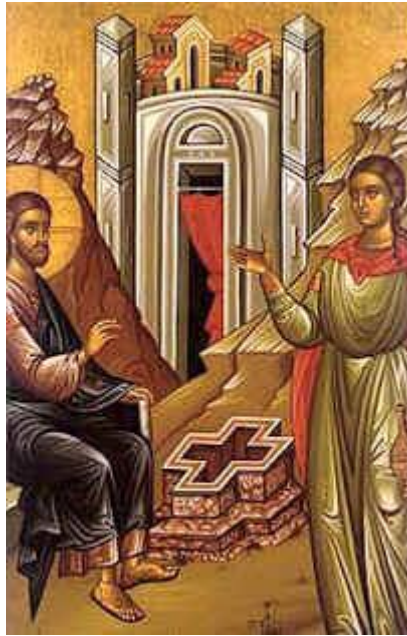
"Water, water everywhere ..." by Fr Gregory



The desperate thirst of the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's epic poem of the same name is the hellish counterpoint to the Christian gospel:-

"And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb." [Revelation 22:1 cf Ezekiel 47:1-12]

" (Jesus said) ... whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." [John 4:14]



The Holy Feast of the Theophany is a great celebration of TWO aspects of our faith.

Firstly, it is a seal of the messiahship of Christ and a confession of the Blessed Trinity, for the Father confirmed his Word in the Word made flesh, full of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, and no less, it is a celebration of the new life of Baptism bubbling up and gushing forth from God within the hearts of His People and in the World as the River of Life.

Sanctified water is not for Orthodox merely a symbol of cleansing or some other banal attribution; it is a real renewal of the whole of Creation and of Life, of which water is one of the most basic constituent parts. This is why Orthodox baptise by full immersion and also take every opportunity at Theophany, (and at other times, say on pilgrimage), to take to and from the waters of life.

A holy tradition concerning the Great Blessing of the Waters at Theophany after the Liturgy in the open air by a river, lake or the sea, is that the bishop or priest will through the blessing cross used for the sanctification into the water. It is recovered by some youth for whom this a great honour. (In Russia this is all the more remarkable as the ice has to be broken first!).

More profoundly, the casting of the Cross reminds us that we must cast our nets of faith deep into the waters of God's love and power. This necessary drowning brings not death but life. Will we, this Theophany have the courage and trust in God to "dive in?"

The Witness of Holy Russia



Cathedral Church of the Archangel Michael, Nizhny Novgorod

Two events this month reminded me of the heroic and unshakeable faith of the Russian people. First, a newspaper cutting of crowds queuing to get inside the Cathedral of St. Basil in Moscow and an inspired talk by Dr Maria Vorozheva on the present situation of the Russian Orthodox Church. Isn't it wonderful that after 70 years' of the most virulent persecution the Church has seen since Diocletian, the faith of so many in Holy Russia, young and old alike is so vibrant and intact.

I shall never forget a pilgrimage to the Nizhny Novgorod region in August 1995 when Nicholas Chapman and I together with a parishioner / interpreter (Julia Kuznetsova) stayed with Fr Vladimir Chugunov, parish priest of the Church of St. Nicholas, Nikolo Pogost, some 40 km from the city. The community had undertaken a major restoration of the church closed by Stalin.

Deeply etched in my memory was the welcome given to us by the members of the church after the Liturgy. The radiance in the hard worn faces of the faithful moved me to tears. They were so happy that British people were discovering Orthodoxy and I immediately felt that tangeable bond between believers which sustains us all in Christ. Of these countless folk who have often given of their very lives for the gospel we shall never be worthy.

Perhaps in the west, as we venerate the New Martyrs of Russia, we just might develop that true steel in the soul which, loving Christ above all things, will prepare us to give our lives for Him. The Russian people have lived with and for such a faith for centuries. This, notwithstanding the terrible sufferings of that vast country, is what makes Russia holy. May Britain once again become a holy nation, a city of saints, of the calibre of our brothers and sisters in Holy Rus.

Fr Gregory

THE FORGIVENESS OF GREAT LENT



The Sunday before Lent begins, the day on which the Church liturgically remembers the fall of Adam and Eve, is called Cheesefare Sunday. This is because it is traditionally the last day of eating dairy products before the time of fasting. This day is also called Forgiveness Sunday since everyone must enter the lenten effort by forgiving and asking forgiveness of each other. In many churches, schools and monasteries this is done through a special "rite of forgiveness" following the evening vespers at which the Church formally inaugurates the lenten season. The significance of the act of giving and receiving forgiveness is obvious. God does not forgive us if we do not forgive each other. It is that simple.

--For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you;

--but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Mt. 6:14-15)

The Christian life is called the "imitation of God" by the fathers of the Orthodox Church. This conviction comes from the Bible, from the Old Testament, where the Lord through Moses says to His people: "consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44)--a sentence quoted in the first letter of Peter in the New Testament:

--As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,

--but as He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written,

--"You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Pet. 1:14-16)

Imitating the holiness of God is the task for human beings set forth also by the apostle Paul. It is the specific task of Christians. (Eph. 4:22-25,31-5:1)

The greatest possible "imitation of God" is to be forgiving. God is the One who forgives. All of His love for man (philanthropia) is love for sinners, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

...Love between sinners is essentially expressed in forgiveness. There is no other way. It cannot be otherwise. Forgiveness is the singular expression of love in this fallen world. If, therefore, we desire to be loved and forgiven by God--and even more, if we know that as a matter of fact we are so loved and forgiven--then we must love and forgive each other. The lenten season exists for this purpose: to express the love of God for one another through mutual forgiveness. This is the teaching of Jesus Himself.

(Mk. 11:25-26) (Lk. 6:37-38)...[Taken from, "The Lenten Spring" by Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko]

"The Father and Feminism"

(Transcript of a talk given by Fr. Gregory)

Feminism is such a difficult thing to define and feminists are by no means agreed on what feminism is. For some, feminism is merely an attempt to redress inequality of opportunity between the sexes in employment and gender roles in the family and community. For others feminism is a battle against the alleged repression of all things feminine by men, the only solution for which is all out gender war until the ground is recovered. There are religious variants of feminism based on the first view which are content to secure interchangeability of function between men and women at all levels of Church life. For these, working towards the first (legitimate) female Pope is a sacred task. Other more militant religious feminists, basing their views on the second model of gender war, regard Christianity as inescapably patriarchal and oppressive. These seek a new religion with some ties to Jesus but essentially rehabilitating the goddess cult of former times.

This talk is not seeking to address every variant of feminism both moderate and radical, secular and faith based. I fear we should then get entangled in a morasse of social comment, half-baked theories and contentious subjectivity. Rather, here, I shall attempt to consider the Person of the Father in relation to feminism as a whole for there are some common themes in the general feminist reaction to this basic tenet of Christianity that God is our Father.

The first person in the modern era to address this issue from a psychoanalytic perspective was, of course, Sigmund Freud. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since Freud grappled with the tortured neuroses and psychoses of his repressed Viennese patients. Modern psychiatry no longer doffs its cap to the "Great Master" as once before. Nonetheless, Freud's assessment of Christian belief in God the Father is pivotal in trying to understand feminism's varying reactions against it.

Freud argued that "Father" was a projection by us humans onto the nature of God. We, some of us that is, have had such lousy fathers on earth, that, it is argued, we seek by way of compensation, an ideal Father in Heaven. This projection is a reaction to a neurosis. Deal with the neurosis, namely our half-concealed hatred for our human fathers, and the need to call God "Father" will vanish away. In fact, for Freud, Jew that he was, much of religion was really a projection of our disappointment and pain onto the canvass of Heaven. Now the reason why Freud's view was so popular was its plausibility at first hearing. Clearly God is not male, (or female). Did not Christ himself teach that:- "God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and Truth?" Freud would not even admit that God was LIKE a father. God was the ILLUSION of an ideal Father, made necessary by our anxieties and hurts. The plausibility of this approach then lead many to suggest that since our experience of human fatherhood was sometimes cruel and corrupting we should hesitate before calling God Father for fear of making eternal and immeasurable the pain of knowing the divine in the hearts and lives of those abused by their own fathers. It goes without saying of course that this made Jesus the archetypal neurotic in the eyes of Freud. It was he who started the whole "Father-thing" off!

At this point, along come the religious feminists, who then claim that whereas "Mother" would also be a projection, since all God-talk is symbolic and derived from our human experience, we should offer "Mother" instead as an alternative. "Mother" is warm and kind, deeply imbued with the dark warmth and comfort of the earth, the breast and the womb. These are much the same feminists of course who have no compunction in ripping human life from the womb in abortion and parading their sexuality in the media, (and goading men to do the same), on the grounds that this is empowering! Earth Mother apparently, like the wolf in Little Red Hiding Hood has sharp teeth and claws. We Christians know this of course since it was the matriarchal dominance of paganism which was so besotted with abortion, child abuse and child sacrifice. Not much has changed, has it?

We all shrink of course from such perversions of fatherhood and motherhood and yet the logic of Freud's analysis is inexorable. If paganism is to be resisted, (as a moderate feminist might argue), then God must become "Parent" or perhaps "It", a very unsatisfactory situation, and in Orthodox terms, of

course, downright heresy. So, as Orthodox Christians we need to force our culture to be much more radical on this issue than it has hitherto been. We need to reach back behind the feminists' agenda at Freud's basic premise that God as Father is a projection for our pain, ever seeking to recover our ideal Father, eternally beyond our grasp.

Notice how Freud starts. He takes something which is so obviously true, namely, that God is not literally a male person and then proceeds to deny the truth that God is Father, as if one followed the other. God, of course, can be Father without being male but only by recognising that all religious language is refined by the conviction that God is so utterly **UNLIKE** anything created. Therefore, God is not **like** a father, He is, in the First Person, **the** Father, **the** Source, **the** Fount of all that is; the Son eternally begotten from Him and the Spirit proceeding forth. There is an "outgoingness in Love" in God which makes "Father" the most singular and apt expression. True there is an analogy in respect of human fatherhood, but it is an analogy **to** human fatherhood, not **from** it. This truth lies at the very heart of the absurdity of feminism's attack on God the Father. The Father is not imaged from our human **fathers**, (for that would be to make God in our own image, an idol); human fatherhood in its highest expression is imaged or derived from God the **Father**, (in other words, we are made in the image of God). As St. Paul says in Ephesians 3:14-15:-

*"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **from whom** the whole family in heaven and on earth is named."*

Now, there is one gaping hole in this presentation. If Genesis teaches, (which it does), that the image of God is manifest in men **and** women as created, then why cannot motherhood as well as fatherhood be derived from God in such a manner as to legitimise God as Mother as well as Father? The answer to this one lies in the nature of God's creative power. God creates without dependency on another for he is sovereign and free and acts in the first instance alone. "Let it be" as He says, and it is. This is not the action of a divine Mother. Mothers, in a human sense, act co-operatively and in a receptive manner. Motherhood is derived from the earth, not from the Godhead. This does not make motherhood any less holy. Orthodox venerate matter as the creative and fecund principle of life, but this life comes in the first instance from the "outside" as it were, from the Father. To derive motherhood from the Godhead rather than the earth would be to give God a womb and to make the Universe "her" Body. This is the very essence of paganism and it has resurfaced again recently in the works of such heretical theologians as Rosemary Radford Ruether. For Orthodox Christians, motherhood is derived from the Theotokos, the Mother of God, the first and highest sanctified creature of the Lord who, being without form, took humanity upon Himself from her. In so doing, the Word and the Spirit worked but never ceased to depart from the Father who remained the Father. When God becomes Mother, however, "she" is revealed a vicious harridan bent upon destruction as well as life, a sort of sub-Christian Durga or Kali, the one who must be appeased at all costs. The Mother of God is such an affront to feminists because her sanctity protests at this abuse of motherhood and the abominable fruit it has generated, sour and bitter to the taste; the infanticide of abortion, the trivialisation and degradation of sex, the rape of the earth.

The only remedy for all these ills is to renounce Freud and his perversion of the Christian gospel and to return to a true biblical notion of God the Father and human fatherhood; the Theotokos, the created earth and human motherhood.

Finally, can this agenda be pursued whilst yet embracing a moderate feminism which would pursue equality of opportunity in all realms of human life and work ... a feminism which is, shall we say, religiously neutral? I'm not sure we can even do that. Consider equality of opportunity. This is a good thing and to be promoted. But what do we make of these opportunities? Do we send women as battle hardened troops into the front line? Do we ask men, similarly, to emasculate themselves by posing as women in Cosmopolitan and other such magazines? Do we promote the idea that gender is irrelevant to function when all the evidence cries out that there are distinctively male and female aspects of our humanity which, if to be honoured, must remain non-interchangeable? Do we rob a woman of her motherhood by making her a "priest?" Do we rob a man of his fatherhood by making him feel guilty of

his strength? I think not. Many have fed from the poisoned wells of Freud and his feminist great grandchildren for long enough and have suffered for it.

Isn't it about time then that we embraced life rather than death? Isn't it about time we worshipped the Father again and implored the Mother? Isn't it about time that we become co-heirs of the Son as children of God? Isn't it about time that the Spirit ruled rather than the bankrupt false prophets of atheism? Feminism is dead and death dealing. The Father remains, and waits for the return of His errant children.

Fr Gregory

"Incense, icons and faith" from "THE INDEPENDENT" 19 March 1998

More and more westerners are turning to the timeless certainties of the Eastern Orthodox church. As the Royal Academy celebrates its art, Steve Crawshaw explains its attraction. At the Russian Orthodox cathedral in South Kensington, there is the same thick smell of incense that you can inhale in every Russian church from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The singing, with its full, throbbing bass line, is equally Russian - rousing and melancholy by turn. In an Orthodox church, the only musical instrument is the human voice, which fills the echoing space. The service is not for the faint-hearted: it is much longer and more leisurely than its namby-pamby western equivalent, lasting an average of three hours at a stretch. Except for the very old or infirm, worshippers stand throughout the service, as the music and the incense swirl around them. There are no pews, and worshippers move around - lighting candles, listening to the music, kissing icons or lost in prayer. In short, a very Russian event.

And yet, many of the Kensington congregation (and of the Russian-singing choir) are not. Even some of the priests are British. Bernadette Sharpe, a nurse, found the music "much more spiritual" than anything she had heard before. Freke de Graaf, an acupuncturist, was attracted by the "joy" of the church. "It's really alive. It's not just a Sunday church. And the tradition of the theology is rooted very deep," he says. While the Catholic and Anglican churches constantly seek to reinvent themselves, reforming the content and language of services, the Orthodox church - in effect, a group of churches - finds its strength in standing still. It would seem to be the very antithesis of modernity, priding itself on its refusal to follow the fashions of the rest of the world. In some respects, that is precisely what has ensured the Orthodox church strength today - not just in the countries where it is rooted, but also in Britain at the end of the 20th century. No modern fads: just the church, the music, and God.

The art is part of that deliberate lack of modernity. At the Royal Academy in London, an exhibition opens today which pays homage to the the simplicity and complexity of Russia's religious art. In the West, the link between religion and art has been almost severed. We expect to see a Madonna and Child in an art gallery, not in a church. At an Orthodox service, by contrast, small icons are dotted around the church, and the large central iconostasis forms a focal point. The art has a severe beauty which stands in stark contrast to the lushness of Western art. None the less, the austerity is never removed from earthy reality. In Andrei Tarkovsky's classic film Andrei Rublev, about the greatest icon-painter of all, the two themes are powerfully merged: the painful realities of the artist's life give way in the final minutes to the hitherto unseen glories of Rublev's art itself. For many, the Orthodox church is the end of a long spiritual search.

Father Michael Fortounatto, one of the Russian priests in London, describes a not untypical phone call last week from a woman who was keen to be admitted to the Orthodox Church. "She grew up an Anglican. She's been through India, and meditation. Now, she has decided to come to us." As the 20th century gives way to the 21st, the number of converts is growing. Deacon Joseph Skinner, himself a former Catholic, talks of the importance of ceremony. "In the Orthodox church, there is a sense that people are standing before the presence of God. Even in a church as ancient as the Catholic Church, something very precious has been lost. It has become introverted, on man and his world." He insists,

however, that this is "not world-denying - it's profoundly world-affirming. We have the best of both worlds - our feet on the ground and our head in the heavens." Peter France, former presenter of the BBC's religious current affairs programme, Everyman, is another convert. He has recently published an account of his voyage from agnosticism through hesitant belief to the certainties of the Orthodox church. He talks admiringly of the "combination of matter-of-factness about the ceremonies and a high seriousness of purpose". The composer John Tavener - who gained a new dose of international fame when his Song for Athene was performed at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, last year - is one of the best-known Orthodox followers in this country. He sees the Western tradition as deeply flawed: "I'm not very at home with humanism." He emphasises the idea of "not-knowing" instead of rationalism, and argues: "We don't know. We cannot judge. Only God can really judge what's going on inside a person's soul."

Until recently, the Russian congregation at the cathedral in Ennismore Gardens consisted only of a few emigres. Now the number of Russians at Orthodox services in this country has increased with diplomats from the Russian embassy - official representatives of the Soviet Communist government just a few years ago - coming to have their children baptised, and to receive baptism. Even now, however, Britons make up as much as a third of the congregation. English-language leaflets at the cathedral encourage visitors.

Elsewhere, the importance of the church as an exclusive bearer of national identity (foreigners not welcome) is strong. The Serb Orthodox Church has often been remarkably close to the nationalism of the Serb leader, Slobodan Milosevic. In Russia, the identity of church and state has been equally strong: during the Second World War, Stalin lifted a ban on the Church to mobilise it on behalf of the Soviet motherland. During the Soviet era, the Church worked hard to achieve a kind of accommodation with the state. Church leaders avoided public criticism of the authorities. In return, they (though not their congregations) were allowed a relatively comfortable life, though constantly under the beady eye of the KGB. The strange cohabitation led to a split in the church, with a separate emigre Russian Church in London - a split which persists seven years after the collapse of Communism. In Russia today, the Church is more important than ever. The powerful mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, has made the rebuilding of the Church of the Saviour in central Moscow (dynamited by Stalin in 1931) one of the most high-profile and ambitious items on his agenda for the New Moscow. The rebuilding of the church is seen by many Russians as proof of Russia's intrinsic greatness.

The art which goes on display at the Royal Academy this week represents the spiritual, non-national side of the Orthodox church - the side that has attracted so many supporters in this country, as they seek to break away from the perceived wishy-washiness of much Western religion. Tavener emphasises the spiritual qualities of Orthodox worship and art alike: "When I see a Renaissance painting of the Mother and Child what I see is a fat Italian baby, wonderfully executed. Such a picture conveys no theology - which an icon will always manage to do because it is not striving to be realistic." With this "back-to-basics" quality, it sees itself as the core church from which the Catholics broke away, just as the Protestants later broke away from Rome. In other words, no zigzags here. As Peter France notes in his Journey: "The Orthodox church could never be accused of being trendy." In some respects, that is true. None the less, even as fashions come and go, the confident tranquillity that the Church offers is more in demand than for many years. The Church scarcely changes, just as the art has changed only imperceptibly over the years. It does not need to go to the people; the people come to it.

The World Council of Churches - "The Other Option"

There is a growing dissatisfaction in the Orthodox world concerning the World Council of Churches. The Orthodox Church of Georgia has already left, and, apparently the Serbs are considering doing so. The Russian Church Abroad has always regarded ecumenism as a heresy in that it saps Orthodoxy of its

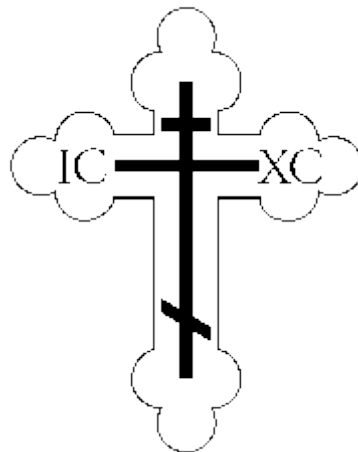
vitality and marginalises its ecclesial identity. The Russian Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has a strong and growing lobby dedicated to this end although involvement in the W.C.C. is probably secure at the moment. The W.C.C. itself seems attached to even bigger and grander ideas with its Secretary General calling for a common date of Pascha (Easter) and a Millennial drive towards the "coming Great Church."

What has alienated so many Orthodox, however, is the politicisation of the W.C.C., the scant actual regard for Orthodox Christianity and its official Protestant ecclesiology. Voices are raised in its defence reminding fellow Orthodox of the unusual character of Christianity on the verge of the Third Millennium, (not, it is claimed, anticipated by those canons forbidding Orthodox from praying with heterodox). Unity is already present in the Orthodox Church, these voices say, BUT it must be struggled for and extended to encompass more Christian communities.

Perhaps even some of those arguing for a withdrawal from the W.C.C. might recognise in this last statement some truth. The key point of difference between "leavers" and "stayers" concerns the usefulness and rightness in principle, vis-a-vis Orthodoxy's goals, of staying in. This is usually explained as presenting a witness of Orthodoxy to all Christians. Those disinclined to favour this approach claim that staying in is an equivocation, a sending of a wrong message and a subtle (or not so subtle) temptation for the Orthodox to subordinate their own self understanding as the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church to some other pan-Protestant notion of a church forged through negotiation, bartering and compromise.

Perhaps there is another option to leaving or staying. Why don't we do what the Roman Catholic Church does and stay as observers, reserving our position for possible future participation or active withdrawal? What do you think?

Orthodoxy and Evangelism



In one sense The Orthodox Church is no different from any other Christian community in her commitment to evangelism. The preaching of the good news, ("use words if necessary"), is vital to the Church's self understanding and work. However, in other senses Orthodox Evangelism is radically different from all other forms. Whereas Protestantism tends to emphasise the individual believer's relationship with Christ and Catholicism the formal submission of that believer to the Church, Orthodoxy encompasses a much wider vision which is both personal and communal whilst at the same time rooted in the effectual operation of the Holy Spirit within the communion of the Church.

Evangelism in Orthodoxy is pneumatic in character, that is, it is orientated entirely towards the "acquisition of the Holy Spirit," (St. Seraphim of Sarov), which the blessed saint saw as vital to the gathering in of the faithful. This is the witness of the Fathers that the regeneration of our humanity by

the energies of the Holy Spirit is what builds the Church. There is no Church without Pentecost. There is no message, no life, no hope, without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

So perhaps Orthodox evangelism is characterised by the imperative: "be filled with the Holy Spirit!" ... but here we must stop and take care. So many empty appeals to an abstract, superficial or emotionally contrived experience of the Holy Spirit characterises so much of western Christian thought that we need to remind ourselves of the vast and demanding requirements of Spirit acquisition. Understand the process of the Spirit's ennoblement of our humanity properly and you understand what is required by Orthodox Evangelism.

1. It does not happen overnight! Our very self:- body, mind and soul, (which constitutes the "heart"), is both delicate and stubborn. Delicate because no enduring change happens by force, only by the sure purposeful and gracious action of the Holy Spirit. Stubborn because our resistance of God's desire for us is deep, not easily recognised and engrained by habits of sin. It will take a lifetime of repentance before the vessel of our heart is ready for the fullness of the gift of the Spirit which is our glorification, (or deification by grace). We are granted a pledge of the inheritance to come in our baptism but the preaching of the Word requires the diligent application of its life-giving potential most aptly taught in the Parable of the Sower. Orthodox Evangelism is, therefore, continuous and always suspicious of instant results.
2. It is always contextualised by the Community of the Church as a relational and hierarchical organism in the Spirit. In this, Orthodoxy is perhaps closer to Catholicism than to Protestantism, but this by no means tells the whole tale. The Church is not something in Orthodoxy which stands over and against the believer. It is the water in which the believer swims; it is the shoal of brothers and sisters in which the believer finds solace and strength and love; it is the future glory of the whole of Creation transfigured and reconnected across its immensities by the Divine Spirit. Metaphors tumble furiously when Orthodoxy speaks of the Church but perhaps the key connectivity lies in the organic rootedness of all the baptised in the Body of Christ built upon the Apostles prayers, fellowship and teaching. Orthodox Evangelism is therefore always experiential, a way of life in the Church. It is never to be interpreted as a disincarnate message. It is always personal and communal.
3. It is always orientated radically toward the people and most especially perhaps, "the little ones," the despised and rejected of this world which are still so close to our Lord's heart. This is clear from the endeavours of the Orthodox Missions and their Saints from Pentecost to the present day. We would do well to remember that it was Jewish peasants, Roman soldiers, the uncared for poor and lowly ranking citizens to whom the gospel life first appealed. In India the lower castes were more receptive to the gospel. In Alaska St. Herman stood up for the rights of the Aleut people against the rapaciousness of the Russian traders. St. Nicholas of Japan did not try and supplant Japanese culture with the Russian. He trained and sent out Japanese converts with the first basics of the Christian life and message. Sts. Cyril and Methodius went so far as to refashion and indigenise language that all the Slav people might worship Christ as one. When the princes and the powerful did accept Christ, they accepted Him on the same terms as the poor and this is what characterised their sanctity. One need only think of the partnership of our own holy father Aidan and king Oswald to grasp the vision of Orthodoxy for a "new heaven and a new earth."

Orthodox Evangelism is an action of the Church for the World and for its salvation. It is, however, an action which takes pains to integrate Creation wholly within the purpose and reign of God. It is grounded not in human techniques but in the death destroying life of Pascha and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. It takes generations to seed and grow properly but its sowing is none the less imperative or vigorous for its long term view. And, above all, it is not for faint hearts but those who trust mightily in God beyond their own life and into eternal Kingdom of the Son.

Fr Gregory

Where is the Church? (Part 1)

by Fr Gregory

"Church" is probably the most abused word in the English language in the English speaking world after "love." "Church" can mean anything today from the "Church" of Scientology, to the building down the road, to journalese for anything which is vaguely Christian, (usually defined as someone saying: "We are Christians.")

This indifferentism to belief, worship and life is endemic in secular culture. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are judged not by their beliefs but by their methods. Their beliefs are generally reckoned to be Christian by the uninformed, their methods not. Then of course there is the "hypermarket" approach to religion, (religion that is, not faith). According to this view we all have different temperaments and need different "spiritualities" to match, (Myers-Briggs). These different "spiritualities" are provided by different churches and traditions within churches. The "customer" then makes his or her own choice. All choices are more or less valid and equal. Denominationalism is seen as legitimate diversity for a "pick-'n-mix" clientele. The "Church" is what all of this is together. Any one who dares to suggest that some "churches" have a firmer grasp on truth than others are written off by post-modernists as deluded triumphalists desperately seeking to bolster their own institutional status with naive fundamentalist claims. Church and dogma are now two irreconcilable opposites. In the touchy-feely, feel-good spiritual hedonism of our times whatever is true is that which meets your needs. According to this criterion you could believe that Jesus was a visiting alien and still call yourself a "church."

It is difficult not to see the marks of Antichrist in all of this. The apocalyptic spirit of Christianity, derided by the "enlightened ones", but following our Lord's example and teaching has always warned about wolves amongst the sheep, men itching for some new doctrine or other, the great whore of Babylon which will even deceive the elect. Although it is important not to go overboard on this, apocalypticism can often be a good cold shower for all those (Christians?) who think that provided you love Jesus, it doesn't matter what church you belong to or what you believe so long as you are sincere and tolerant.

If the cold plunge of apocalypticism is too much for a person to take perhaps the question "*Where is the Church?*" is more astute. The first answer which presents itself from the culture is of course "everywhere" and, therefore, of course, nowhere. Let us consider this.

If it is really true that the Church is everywhere then all the beliefs, practices, worship and teachings of all the profusion of bodies calling themselves "Christian" are equally valid. So if a Jehovah's Witness denies the Trinity and an Orthodox Christian affirms this doctrine and if both groups are considered to be Christian then the doctrine of the Trinity or its denial is entirely incidental to being a Christian. The end result of this generalisation of the Church is atheism, or perhaps humanism with a religious veneer.

Now, of course, no group claiming to be Christian can accept this analysis without surrendering to the post-modernist claim that truth is what we want it to be and that no society can be said to be its guardian and expression. So if truth, or, just simply, God, matters to a Christian, what his/her Church teaches is vital to being a Christian. There is no avoiding the disarming question:- "Where is the Church?" It is a question whose answer is vital to belief, and in our day to the prospects of Christianity as a whole.

You might have thought that this editorial was going to answer its own question ... not this month. In the next issue we shall attempt to answer that question. This article is to confirm the vital necessity of the question.

Fr Gregory

Where is the Church? (Part 2)

by Fr. Gregory

Last month we established that the Church is constituted by God and is an identifiable body living out a specific faith. This month we try to answer the question: "Where is the Church?" First we must assess the claims of some other Christian communities, notably, Protestant and Catholic.

Of course if we were to follow the logic that the Church is everywhere then it follows that she is nowhere in particular. This is the Protestant solution to the question. The boundaries of the Church, (such as they are), continually shift and change as the "Church" more or less approximates to "someone's" idea or ideal of the Kingdom. This could be a founder or it could be a set of doctrines based on a denominational confession. The Church as such is only known to God and any one Church must be "semper reformandum" ... always being reformed.

This is deeply unbiblical, (and therefore extremely ironic for Protestants who claim the Bible as sole authority!) When Paul writes his letters he addresses them to the Church at Corinth, at Rome, Ephesus or wherever. He doesn't wander round the streets wondering whether or not this individual, this congregation, is or isn't part of the Church. Neither does he act as if his own authority as an Apostle were unimportant. So, Congregationalists who would have us believe that each local community should be autonomous are as equally mistaken as those Protestant founding fathers who believed that they had rediscovered Christianity and that everybody should follow them.

The Reformers struggled to find some constitutive principle for the Church. Calvin tried to locate this in good Presbyterian order and his own brand of systematic theology. Luther was more vague, preferring to use the tag "wherever the Word and Sacraments are duly administered." Anglicans picked up on this one but then spent the next 400 years squabbling what this Word was and whether or not a Protestant view of the Sacraments could be reconciled with a Catholic view.

The error of all these Protestant attempts lies in the notion that the Church can somehow be "rebuilt" by either human engineering (anathema to Calvin) or by rediscovering some lost pot of gold, (historical criticism). The Roman Catholic Church of course firmly resisted (and resists) the idea that the Church isn't already here. She believes that she is that Church and that all other Christian Trinitarian communities, to a greater or lesser degree, share in that divine fullness that she alone possesses. Now and again the Roman Catholic Church talks about "sister churches" ... a curious version of the now discredited branch theory of the Church but which is useful to Rome when she wishes to court her suitors and rescue her wayward children.

Rome's claims might reflect an Orthodox understanding of the visible Church IF SHE HAD REMAINED ORTHODOX. But the point is, she hasn't. Claiming apostolic pedigree is not enough. Apostolic life, which is both hierarchical and conciliar, is conservative in relation to the past or else it loses its moorings for the future. When Rome started bringing in such innovations as papal supremacy, the filioque and a rationalised theology which distanced God and Humanity from each other in a moralising vacuum, it parted company with the Orthodox Church. True, Rome retains many marks of the Orthodox Church of which she was once part, but her life now is very different and separated from the authentic stream of Orthodox life. There is no way that Orthodoxy will ever accept being thought of as a "sister Church" or "another lung." Rome doesn't believe this herself by the way she behaves, so why should anyone else? It is a barmy idea anyway. To say that the Church is in two states simultaneously is just as silly as saying that she is in many states simultaneously. It is of course a warm and nice thing to say that another church is your "sister" or your "other lung," ... but saying it alone does not make it so. Indeed if such sentiments become a substitute for doing the real and hard work of ecumenical convergence then they can be counterproductive to their intention.

So, reader, by now you should have concluded that Orthodoxy believes that she is the One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church. But, how so? How may such a claim be justified? That question will be answered in the third and final part next month.

Fr Gregory

Where is the Church? (Part 3)

by Fr. Gregory

So far in the previous two articles I have contended that the Church is "somewhere" (rather than everywhere or nowhere). I have claimed that Protestantism, by being largely unconcerned with this question, disqualifies itself. Catholicism on the other hand disenfranchises itself by over extension, largely through a centralised monarchical papacy and the concomitant distortions in Christian doctrine.

Now, I am not saying that Protestants and Roman Catholics are not Christians or that they merely belong to "religious organisations" rather than churches. In his graciousness, God has nurtured and sustained great and living witnesses to orthodoxy (small "o") in these traditions. These gems are scattered across the whole Christian field and we are to thank God for them. Nor am I claiming that just because Orthodoxy is the only one left that she must be the Church or that Orthodoxy especially commends itself by its outstanding qualities for such a claim. So what is Orthodoxy claiming and how does she justify her position?

The Orthodox Church claims, (but does not preach herself to be), the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church. She most certainly does not think of herself as *Eastern* Orthodox for that would compromise her claim to unity and catholicity. So, for example, the Orthodox Church of America or the Orthodox Church in Japan are just as much part of world Orthodoxy as the Russian or Greek Churches.

Furthermore, the Orthodox Church teaches that in the First Millennium, before Rome fell away, the whole (known) world fell under the sway of the Orthodox Church, North, South, East and West. This is the Church of St. Chad, of St. Leo the Great, of St. Irenaeus, of St. David, of St. Genevieve. This much is not contentious, (except perhaps our judgement on Rome!); it is a matter for historical verification and it is plain enough for all to see.

There is a basis for Orthodoxy's claim to fullness of faith as the One True Church of Christ upon which she invites scrutiny and debate; for if her claim is true on this ground her nature is fully vindicated. (Interestingly Anglicans used to pride themselves on the self same criterion. Perhaps only the evidence remains to judge between us!) This basis is ... *we have kept the fellowship, we have kept the Faith.*

Unlike Protestants we have not excised anything disapproved of by a founder or narrowly excluded by confessional biblical literalism. Unlike Roman Catholics we have not added to the deposit of faith to bolster the effectiveness of our own institutions or to court the world. Orthodoxy, has, obstinately and stained rich by the blood of the martyrs, held to the faith once revealed to the saints.

This does not mean that we merely repeat continuously long established and hallowed formulae. It does not mean that we are sterile or ossified in our conservatism. But it does mean that we cherish what has been handed down to us as a way of life, as a way of faith, so that we can face a Third Millennium with a vibrant hope AND a firm mooring.

Yes, we may criticise the "West" for its theological shortcomings, (its institutionalism, the "filioque, the papacy, its "dry" and over-rationalised approach to personal faith, its marginalisation of the resurrection and the Trinity), but these problems are soluble if the "West" begins again to live the temper, ethos and content of Orthodox life. We are not claiming that we live it to the full but we are claiming, from where

we stand, that we do know what **IT** is! Similarly we may not say where the Church is **NOT**; but we may say where the Church **IS**!

This third and final article leaves a lot unsaid and unexplained; particularly those questions clustering around the challenge:- "How do you justify saying that Orthodoxy is Christianity with "now't taken out?" This is deliberate. How, reader, would you take up the challenge to prove or disprove our claim if everything was handed to you on a plate? The plate would be too big for one thing! Far more important is your own search which may now begin, (or already have begun ... but not yet completed, even if you are Orthodox). Good hunting! and may God go with you.

Fr Gregory

Some Modern Heresies

In this study I shall consider two contemporary heresies, the first concerning doctrine, (post modernism), the second concerning action, (situation ethics).

"Heresy" is not a word one often hears today, certainly not in secular conversation, hardly ever in ecumenical circles and only grudgingly in many Christian communities. It is a word which has come to have unpleasant overtones. The smell of burning, ideological oppression and show trials registers faintly in the subconscious and many avoid the subject like the plague.

Some might object that heresy is an ecclesiastical term concerning those who choose (Gk: haeresis) outside the Church's fullness, (her catholicity), and thereby fall into error. They argue that heresy cannot be applied to non-Christian thought. This is seriously misguided. All truth is God's Truth and for those who fall away from the Church's witness, error is error, whether it is committed on the floor of the House of Commons, at a local supermarket check-out or in the operating theatre of a general hospital.

There are identifiable reasons why "heresy" is out and "tolerance" is in. One particular heresy prides itself on the belief that there is no defining truth to be sought out. In some senses, this is the ultimate heresy, to deny that there is any truth, universally applicable, at all. As you might expect this heresy has an "ism" all to its own, **POST MODERNISM**.

Post modernists seem to be committed to the truth but it is a notion of truth totally inconsistent with Christian truth. They say that "such and such" may be the truth "*for me*" and / or "*in this situation,*" but it can never be the truth for all, in all places and at all times.

As this way of thinking begins to contaminate many churches the effect on Christian teaching can be devastating, once accepted. There can be no revealed Christian truth to which all Christians subscribe, merely options, positions, opinions. There is a self-fulfilling prophecy here because as many churches see their membership in the West shrink, church leaders resort to trying to please everyone to keep them on board. This only makes the situation worse as the decline gathers momentum.

Post modernism (of which relativism and pluralism are merely features) is a sign of the final degeneracy of "Christian" culture in the West. Everything is more or less acceptable so nothing really matters anymore. There is no truth "out there" just a feeling "in here." In the end there is nothing, literally. This is the final triumph of James Ayre and Bertrand Russell ... truth reduced to mathematical formulae and scientific evidence. All else is choice and personal autonomy.

A Christian answer to post modernism will shift the ground of the discussion to our common humanity. If indeed there is no common currency of truth then there can be nothing that binds humanity together, since it is only truth and shared values which generate community, self worth and direction. No one actually believes that humanity lacks this common centre, this common frame of reference so the search

for truth will continue. What we need to do, however, is blow away vigorously all the post modernist "fluff," (and it is only fluff), which stands in our way.

A sister heresy of post modernism is **SITUATION ETHICS**, a term coined by Joseph Fletcher in a highly influential book of the same name in 1966. Fletcher argued that everything that a person needs for moral action is given by the situation itself from which he or she intuitively discerns a correct response and in a manner largely unresponsive to externally applied rules or the guidance of any shared tradition or experience. The Ten Commandments therefore become the "Ten Suggestions" -- Christian moral teaching a resource rather than a controlling framework.

The ultimate degeneracy of this position has been the advocacy of personal choice in all things, the sovereignty of the individual in any situation subject only to the law. Situation ethics, however, makes the law a very problematic thing especially in personal matters such as sexuality and family life. Since the 60's we have seen the law retreat from this area and many churches shift their attention to "issues" which everyone can get worked up about but which rarely impinge on anyone's life except when they wound personal conviction. Therefore, one may get up a head of steam about "animal rights" but turn a blind eye to abortion. Letters may be written about the burden of international debt but the same correspondents will probably quibble about raising public finance for home social programs, let alone dig deep in their own pockets to support worthy causes. After all, that's what we have the Lottery for, isn't it?

Situation ethics is based on an older heresy that each individual may sort out for him or herself the right thing to do in any given situation. I suppose, in a way, it's the primal heresy of Adam and Eve, this belief that humanity is self-regulating. Situation ethics has no place for our alienation from God, the need for salvation, the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Church. This new "creed" is what happened when post modernism (long before it was named) infected our moral sense. It remains a deadly virus and deeply anti-Christian.

When we seek a cure for this heresy, we hit a problem, however. The problem is that situation ethics echoes, faintly, a truth of Christian moral theology but which it both misunderstands and misinterprets. This truth is known by the tag: "circumstances alter cases," a commonplace of Christian moral discrimination and upheld by Orthodoxy in its practice of "economía." Christianity resists the legalism of simply applying and enforcing a rigid moral code on each and every situation. There may be circumstances, contexts in which a normal and universal rule is modified. Orthodoxy allows for this for example in its discretion to permit a second marriage after divorce. BUT, the Church does not mean by this that any individual may refine the Church's teaching to the point where it is no account at all and the exception is then seen as the application of a rule rather than its occasional modification. In this, Orthodoxy rests upon the discretion of the whole Church in the Holy Spirit and the ministry of her bishops. Joseph Fletcher and his successors, one suspects, merely depended upon themselves. As someone once said:- "he who directs himself is counsel to a fool.

The Church therefore needs to counter situation ethics by a consistent application of her moral teaching within the household of faith. This is a pastoral matter but it is in principle a public issue. It will call for witness, (if not technical martyrdom), and a costly one at that. So often I have heard this remedy attacked on the grounds that we must not judge. Indeed, we must not judge, but one cannot apply this dominical teaching out of context. A Christian does not judge because he knows the Church's teaching and not because he is ignorant or dismissive of it. There is integrity in respecting the rule and yielding to divine judgement and the Church's mercy. There is no integrity whatsoever in using mercy as a pretext for licence. Indeed this is situation ethics "by the back door."

So, where does this excursion into heresy lead us? well, with the need of a compass. This cannot be provided either by post modernism or by its sister, situation ethics. It can only be provided by the Church. In all things then, we submit to the mind of Christ which is mediated to us by His Body in the Holy Spirit. In this, we, as Orthodox Christians, strive to maintain the tradition of our fathers in fidelity

to the Gospel of Christ and not to the world and the shifting sands of its so-called values. We build our house on a Rock. Let others build on the edge of a cliff!

Fr Gregory

The Dormition of the Theotokos (Mother of God)

(in the West, the Assumption of our Lady, feast 15 August)



Although there is no historical record in Scripture concerning the death of our Lady, her repose is within the living memory of the Church and the revelation concerning these things imparted to us by God. On account of the lack of a primary witness in Scripture, however, the Dormition (Assumption) is not part of the public dogma of the Orthodox Church, (in the way it is with the Roman Catholic Church for example).

This does not mean that it is any less significant for us. Quite the contrary; the repose of the Theotokos is a great source of consolation and hope to us that we, with her, may enter the glory of the resurrection of her Son. The Dormition celebrates the great promise of the gospel that we may be glorified in Christ by living and dying well in the Faith and Life of the Church.

"Of the Church" is apposite here. Notice how the Church gathers around the bier of the Mother of God; St. James, the first bishop of Jerusalem leads the assembled company with St. Peter presiding at the funeral rites. The saints of God and the angels join the company of praise and intercession. Christ Himself, carrying the soul of his Mother tenderly, (as tenderly as she once carried Him), is the glory and central focus of the icon in the mandorla of heaven.

The Mother of God is one of us, born into this world under sin and yet not sinning, (Orthodox do not believe in the Immaculate Conception of our Lady which has too much to do with distorted Augustinian understandings of the transmission of original sin). Her perfect obedience to the Word of God and her Son is the portal of her entry into the heavenly kingdom, the first of many to be glorified in Christ. Her ascension prefigures our own if we, by grace, achieve that purity of heart which is our transparency to God and His transparency to us whereby he deifies us. This purity is no mere moralism. It is a completely changed life which is capable of sharing in Christ's death-destroying life. Let us pray that we one day will be received by Christ even as here He receives His Blessed Mother, the Ever-Virgin Mary. Amen.

Is Islam to be trusted?

In my secondary school teaching I have been very privileged to meet many Muslim children and their families who are very appreciative, (much more so than many "nominally" Christian parents), of my efforts to bring the children in my care into contact with the great religious traditions of Mankind. Most Muslims, (like most Christians perhaps perhaps), I have no problem with, but Islam is a different matter. It's not the growing strength of international Islamic radicalism per se that causes me to make this observation but the response of Islam to such developments. The recent terrorist bombings in East Africa have largely been accompanied by a deathly (and deadly) hush in the Islamic world.

[It's no use citing the Crusades, the Inquisition and Northern Ireland to me as an Orthodox Christian, (the historical Russian pogroms against the Jews perhaps, I admit) ... these are largely western Christian issues and ones upon which Orthodoxy is just as critical as Muslims or western secularism. Western Christians sacked Constantinople long before the Turks. At least the Sultan didn't try and evict the Patriarch as our "brother" in Rome did 2 centuries earlier!]

However, to my main point Islam can never really be unequivocally against terror precisely because Muhammad was a warrior-prophet. The Qur'an itself propagates the "jihad" and although pious and godly Muslims rightly interpret this as a fight against evil, theocratic Islam which rules by shariah has always used jihad as a means of subjugation and intimidation. Islam is basically intolerant of pluralism except in so far as it more or less admits the possibility of the People of the Book, (Jews and Christians), retaining their religious identity as a "mini-nation" under Islam's political control, (the millet). Even in so-called secular Turkey, however, it is increasingly difficult for the few remaining Greeks to establish the historical reality of Turkey as a multi-ethnic entity. The archaeological remains of Byzantium are an anachronism to many Turks ... as are the distant offspring of their builders.

The West is the "Great-Satan" to many militant Islamists because it is considered to be the breeding ground of decadence and idolatry. Islam is an intensely moralistic monotheistic faith. Many of its ideals some post-Christian westerners secretly admire. The rot has already set in and we perhaps have another few decades before Islam achieves a position of political and religious influence in the West to challenge the pitifully weak Christian culture of our society.

So, no, I don't think Islam can be trusted. It has never accommodated a humane ethic largely because its iconoclasm has rendered it faceless. I shudder every time I see an icon in a Greek museum defaced by the hand of a fanatical Muslim. The eyes are always scratched out. Blind to the Saviour how can they be saved? God knows. But, friends, in our desperate western liberal way of trying to be kind and tolerant, let us not be blind to this truth. Muhammad conquered as much by the sword as by the book.

Fr Gregory

The Meaning of Prayer

‘In vain,’ then, is every spiritual building, every spiritual guard
without the presence of the Lord; consequently, ‘in vain’ every work of
ours without prayer. Prayer makes the presence of the Lord alive and
changes every work which could have been fruitless into light and glory
to the Heavenly Father.

Theses from the Philokalia, Watchfulness and Prayer, by Archimandrite Ioannikios Kotsonis.

You can always tell where a "do-gooder" has been by the "hunted" expression on the face who have benefited from his or her ministrations. This is one of many examples of dead deeds ... actions virtuous in themselves, (sometimes, anyway), but which help the helper rather than the helped.

Prayer changes everything. It gives us a right disposition toward our neighbour, (God's perspective), and an attitude of faith toward the only Good-One and Source of Life. Prayer is the means to holiness which will shine through even the murkiest of human lanterns as soon as that person begins to pray.

Prayer, therefore, has only one meaning ... the Love of God. It intoxicates, but it is also hard work. The greatest and most radiant saints are always those who have spent themselves in the battle and won through with Christ's victory. There is no other way to live the Christian life ... PRAYER.

Fr Gregory

The Balkan Divide

The Balkans is a part of Europe beset by tragedy. In our own time we have seen conflicts between Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Serbs. Latterly there has been an insurgence by Albanians in the Kosovo province of Serbia demanding autonomy which has been responded to by often unacceptable and indiscriminate force by the Serbs. There have been atrocities on all sides although the western press has usually focussed on the crimes of the Serbs and not always with equal understanding or sympathy for the plight of the Serbian people themselves. If you are an American for example, how would you like it if a "Texas Lone Star Independence Movement" started taking up arms against the Federal Government? How would the British Government feel if Cornwall were to engage in an armed struggle to secede from the Union?

One thing which is sadly lacking from the West's involvement in this running sore known as the Balkans is a sense of *history*. Now when it comes to war crimes of course on any side, history is completely irrelevant. But I am not talking about war crimes here. That is not the point at issue; rather we need to face up to the fact that the West often approaches international issues as if history, culture, language and religion don't really matter. Because the democratic west is now largely built upon secular, modernist and pluralist principles, it is highly intolerant of other societies which do not operate on such "self evident truths," (so-called!)

History of course can be used (and has been used) to justify all sorts of atrocities. The British and Irish need not look any further than Northern Ireland for example when it comes to history as a "ball and chain." Although not without its problems, (including recently embarrassment for the ANC), it has been different in South Africa. Here the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has tried to exorcise the past. No such attempt has been made in the Balkans. The Balkan Muslims feel oppressed as the last ripples of the Ottoman Empire recede from their feet. The Serbs nurse their centuries old wounds concerning the Battle of Kosovo. The Croats exalt their European credentials by courting Germany but not without the Serbs reminding them of their collaboration with the Nazis in the last War. The ghosts of history still stalk the Balkans because they are not acknowledged. We are dealing with an East-West divide here and we probably have been facing this ever since the break up of the Roman Empire whose administrative boundary ran down the middle of present day Bosnia.

And so we have America, Britain, Germany and the Vatican lining up with the Bosnians and Albanians. Russia, primarily, shores up its southern Slav brothers. It's difficult not to see here the west's inaction as Constantinople fell to the Turks. It's difficult not to see a modern pan-European ideal based on the westernisation of the East. None of this is going to help the peoples of the Balkans live together in peace. Every single ham-fisted initiative by the west in the Balkans seems to have been bungled. No wonder the Muslims feel let down and no wonder the Serbs feel that this is all a western plot. Personally I think in the West it's a mixture of opportunism, a lack of imagination or sympathy and a tendency to see others as we see ourselves. The West can only really have a positive role in the Balkans when it faces some of its own demons.

Fr Gregory

The Need for Fasting

In 1955 in a labour camp in Soviet Russia, the time was approaching for the release of the prisoners. Everyone prayed in expectation and one of the prisoners, a priest, gave the following sermon: "We all know that Saint Nicholas is a great intercessor, helper and miracle worker. He even helped people of other faiths. Let us therefore pray to Saint Nicholas for our release and let us keep a three day fast before his feast day". Forty of the camp inmates agreed to do this and for three days before the feast of the translation of the relics of Saint Nicholas (22nd of March according to the civil calendar), they proposed to eat nothing at all, although camp conditions were severe. When the time came to keep the fast, only 26 of the prisoners observed the fast, plus the priest who communed them during this time. On the feast day of the saint, news arrived of the release of the prisoners. Only 27 names appeared on the release document. How devastated were those who had abandoned the fast!

Whenever a fast approaches, people look at the minimum that they can do. Instead we should always look at the maximum and recognize our weakness and lack of faith. And indeed those who look at the minimum tend in the long run to abandon fasting altogether. The Wednesday fast is an example. This fast day should be observed the same as the Friday fast. We should not expect to eat any food until after the ninth hour, that is after 3 p.m. We should also eat only one meal which should be very simple, consisting of raw vegetables or fruit. This is an example of the maximum. Metropolitan Philaret emphasizes this in one of his sermons. The Metropolitan explains that fasting is not set aside only for clergy or monastics, although we have many examples of great ascetics in the Church such as Saint Chariton, but is a general rule of the whole church. Fasting is a law of the Church. Not to keep the law of the Church requires a special reason. If such a reason exists it is because the Church reaches out to meet our needs and weaknesses in many ways. For example, sick people are not expected to keep a strict fast. This also applied to travellers, especially in the days when travel was long and hazardous. A dispensation from fasting was usually to allow the weary traveller to eat an extra meal, for journeys were long and people had to walk or ride great distances. Today of course there is no need for a dispensation when you can recline in the seat of an aircraft (order a vegetarian meal - editor's note) and 11 hours later arrive at your destination no worse for wear. We should never use this former travel dispensation to indulge our appetite.

Unfortunately many people say "It is all the same to God whether I eat potatoes or ham". Of course God does not need your fast, but you should understand that the fast is for you. God does not need to fast. It is you, who are overfed, that needs to fast. Saint Seraphim of Sarov says that he who does not keep the fast is not a Christian. Let us therefore acknowledge our weakness to please our stomachs and refrain from the hypocrisy of denying the law of the Church. If we cannot keep the maximum, let us confess it. Never say that fasting is a new invention or that it is not necessary. If you keep the fast then you will know what benefits God bestows on them that truly love Him and keep His commandments.

Priest Serafim Gascoigne, Russian Orthodox Cathedral Of St. Nicholas (Seattle, WA, USA)

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A Christmas Message from Bishop Gabriel

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:2,6)

This prophecy has been fulfilled on holy ground – in the village of Bethlehem in a crib inside a cave. Jesus was born there. God has come in the flesh. He has become Man in order to deify us. The hymn of the angels, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth" echoes henceforth in heaven and earth – glory to God incarnate and that peace which God wants both in the world and in the heart of every man called to become a child of God by faith.

We must take to heart the immensity of God's love expressed in His Son Jesus; it is then that we will come to see at its true value the divine God who helps us to renew our life and free us from fear and anxiety. This Gift gives us the resources we need to live worthily and in moral uprightness. We are enlightened by the power of God which burst forth from the cave.

It is then, too, that we will understand that "unto us a Son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulders and His name shall be called the mighty God ... the everlasting Father." (Isaiah 9:6).

The child of Bethlehem has come into this world in order that those who do not see should see (John 9:39). By accomplishing the mystery of the Incarnation, God has put within our reach all we need for our salvation. This salvation becomes realisable through a spiritual relationship linking us with Jesus Christ from that moment on.

He is at once God and man. And we follow His life both through receiving His Spirit and by living according to His will and His teaching. The Church also, which He instituted on earth, is herself at once human and divine. She is human in that she is a gathering of the faithful called together by a true faith and confession – "he that believeth on him is not condemned but he that believeth not is condemned already." (John 3:18)

The Church is also divine by the power of the Holy Spirit working in her – the Holy Spirit fills the heart of the faithful with the Word of God and helps them to draw nearer to the fullness of God in his heavenly Kingdom.

God's Child is born of a Virgin and He is come into the world in order to be the Witness to the truth, to save sinners, calling them to repentance. By His Incarnation he has given us the opportunity of distancing ourselves from the old man and putting on the new man like a garment – entering into a new life. "He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold is a thief and a robber; He that entereth in by the door is the Shepherd of the sheep. To Him the porter openeth and the sheep hear His voice and follow Him. A stranger they will not follow but will flee from him for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:1-5)

My Well-Beloved, God has declared to us by His intermediary, Isaiah, "a Child is born to us. His Name shall be called the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). God said to us through Jeremiah, "the thoughts that I think towards you are thoughts of peace and not of evil." (Jeremiah 29:11) The new-born Child is, therefore, our Peace. He is our only Head and Guide. He is the Shepherd who knows His sheep and they do not flee from Him. We then must work to keep his teaching 'alive' in us. We must watch not to let workers of darkness, deceivers and troublemakers drag us back and hinder us. These are the ones who jump over walls in order not to enter by the door – which is wide open and leads to a safe home.

On this day of the Nativity of God's Child, we offer our prayer to God in repentance, asking Him to have mercy on mankind, which groans under the weight of wars, terrorism, violence and murder. Let us

ask Him that He may enable us to approach the third millennium with a heart ready to rest in the light of the Lord. The light of Jesus burst forth from the crib so that we ourselves may always be children of light!

I send warm Christmas greetings to our British Deanery!

Bishop Gabriel

He Who Is



In the history of the people of Israel just four letters stand out as the most sacred, most wonderful, most unutterable.
These are:-

YHWH

The so called "*Tetragrammaton*" is the Divine Name communicated to Moses from the heart of the burning bush on Mount Horeb, a bush which burned but which was not consumed, (Exodus 3:2,14). The word is pronounced in Hebrew, "Yahweh." In English it means "**I am who I am.**" This Divine Name, (too sacred to be uttered), is paradoxically, full of meaning, and in the context of this theophany, pregnant with explosive historical action.

It is full of meaning for it celebrates the uncontainable majesty of (if you like ...) "God." Hitherto Man has named the animals as having dominion over them. Here at the last is a reality *which may not be named*. Man has no dominion over God. God cannot be limited by human descriptions or ideas. The burning bush incinerates every form of idolatry but transfigures every vehicle which confesses the absolute transcendence of God. There is a necessary mystery at the heart of God which is dark to our senses and understanding but a palpable burning glory to the eyes of faith. This mystery is to be worshipped and confessed, not solved or analysed. The theophany of the burning bush challenges contemporary Man with his limited perceptions, self-obsessions and grandiose schemes to fall down before the Incomparable One. Yahweh is ideologically unknowable but unutterably real and closer than breathing to those who love Him. We must take off our shoes. We are standing on holy ground.

This theophany, however, is no mere mystical experience resting outside the sphere of historical existence. The divine engagement with Moses is personal and dynamic, a precursor to Yahweh's saving action, in this instance, singularly the most important event in early salvation history, the Exodus, or liberation of the People of God from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The Divine Name is no mere ineffable label, it is itself the burning energy of God, majestic in creation, salvation and judgement. Such was, (and is), the knowledge of God to the Jews.

But, there was, (and is), a problem in this theophany for the Jews. It is limited. Only Moses together with the Prophets and High Priests who succeeded him were granted this encounter with the Living God. The people as a whole were not yet ready for the fullness of divine intimacy. So often mindless of divine mercy, again and again they reverted to their former gods, gods of clay, stone and wood; gods that could not save. So the Law brought down from Sinai was a tutor to an untutored people, a people who could only with difficulty behold the fading glory masked in Moses' face when he descended. This glory they themselves were not to see in their own generation.

When in the course of time this people had been tutored by the Law and sanctified by the appointed sacrifices, there was one who was prepared for the greater and fuller revelation, the Theotokos, who herself became a burning bush for the loving fire of Christ-God in the flesh. She presented to the world the Divine Name in the flesh that all might behold and see, might touch and receive the Living Christ. And so the Word made flesh is now received in his humanity as "He Who Is" ... "I am who I am," God from all eternity. The humanity of Christ makes all the difference to the Name and the Name, thereby, makes all the difference to our humanity. The great "I am" "He Who is" is now enfleshed. Jesus said:-
{all the references are from (John's Gospel:J) or finally the [Book of Revelation:R]}

"I who speak to you AM He" (J4:26, 8:28)

"I AM the bread of life" (J6:35,48)

"I AM the living bread" (J6:51)

"I AM the light of the world." (J8:12)

"before Abraham was, I AM" (J8:58)

"I AM the door of the sheep" (J10:7)

"I AM the good shepherd" (J10:11)

"I AM the resurrection and the life" (J11:25)

"I AM the way, the truth and the life" (J14:6)

"I AM in the Father and the Father in me" (J14:10)

"I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser" (J15:1,5)

"I AM the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last" [R1:8,11,17, 22:13]

Beholding Christ in the flesh, we see what we could be by grace as He is by nature. We fall down and worship, not before the invisible Presence in the bush, but before Christ-God in the womb.

He it is then who, washed by Jordan - washes all men clean;
endowed with the Spirit - prays the Father to send the Comforter;
lifted on the Cross - draws all men unto Himself;
raised from the dead - bestows life on all those in the tomb;
ascended to the Father - unites our humanity to God.

And so in the same manner as in the burning bush but now in the flesh, the Incarnation of of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ heralds the dawn of a new Exodus, a paschal liberation from death; a new Covenant, life in the Spirit. Our humanity is to be utterly transfigured by Christ's coming. This is the final act in salvation history, the redemption of all flesh. We, are now to become that burning bush the the Mother of God first became, that vessel of that burning Spirit of Divine Love which is our Alpha and Omega. Let us listen to prophetic words from one of the holy fathers and apply it to our own lives with all seriousness ...

Abba Joseph came to Abba Lot and said to him: "Father, according to my strength I keep a moderate rule of prayer and fasting, quiet and meditation, and as far as I can I control my imagination; what more must I do?" The old man rose and held his hands towards the sky so that his fingers became like flames of fire and he said: "If you will, you shall become all flame!"

Fr Gregory