

revival in contemporary Orthodoxy is the renewed awareness among many Orthodox of the Second Coming and its relevance. 'When a pastor on a visit to Russia asked what is the burning problem of the Russian Church, a priest replied without hesitation: the *Parousia*.'*

Yet the Second Coming is not simply an event in the future, for in the life of the Church the Age to Come has already begun to break through into this present age. For members of God's Church, the 'Last Times' are already inaugurated, since here and now Christians enjoy the firstfruits of God's Kingdom. *Even so, come, Lord Jesus*. He comes already – in the Holy Liturgy and the worship of the Church.

* P. Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie*, p. 9 (*Parousia*: the Greek term for the Second Coming).

Orthodox Worship, I: The Earthly Heaven

The church is an earthly heaven in which the heavenly God dwells and moves.

St Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (died 733)

DOCTRINE AND WORSHIP

There is a story in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* of how Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, while still a pagan, desired to know which was the true religion, and therefore sent his followers to visit the various countries of the world in turn. They went first to the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga, but observing that these when they prayed gazed around them like men possessed, the Russians continued on their way dissatisfied. 'There is no joy among them,' they reported to Vladimir, 'but mournfulness and a great smell; and there is nothing good about their system.' Travelling next to Germany and Rome, they found the worship more satisfactory, but complained that here too it was without beauty. Finally they journeyed to Constantinople, and here at last, as they attended the Divine Liturgy in the great Church of the Holy Wisdom, they discovered what they desired. 'We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.'

In this story can be seen several features characteristic of Orthodox Christianity. There is first the emphasis upon divine beauty: *we*

cannot forget that beauty. It has seemed to many that the peculiar gift of Orthodox peoples – and especially of Byzantium and Russia – is this power of perceiving the beauty of the spiritual world, and expressing that celestial beauty in their worship.

In the second place it is characteristic that the Russians should have said, *we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth*. Worship, for the Orthodox Church, is nothing else than 'heaven on earth'. The Holy Liturgy is something that embraces two worlds at once, for both in heaven and on earth the Liturgy is one and the same – one altar, one sacrifice, one presence. In every place of worship, however humble its outward appearance, as the faithful gather to perform the Eucharist, they are taken up into the 'heavenly places'; in every place of worship when the Holy Sacrifice is offered, not merely the local congregation is present, but the Church universal – the saints, the angels, the Mother of God, and Christ himself. 'Now the celestial powers are present with us, and worship invisibly.* *This we know, that God dwells there among humans*.

Orthodox, inspired by this vision of 'heaven on earth', have striven to make their worship in outward splendour and beauty an icon of the great Liturgy in heaven. In the year 612, on the staff of the Church of the Holy Wisdom, there were 80 priests, 150 deacons, 40 deaconesses, 70 subdeacons, 160 readers, 25 cantors, and 100 doorkeepers; this gives some faint idea of the magnificence of the service which Vladimir's envoys attended. But many who have experienced Orthodox worship under very different outward surroundings have felt, no less than those Russians from Kiev, a sense of God's presence among humans. Turn, for example, from the *Russian Primary Chronicle* to the letter of an Englishwoman, written in 1935:

This morning was so queer. A very grimy and sordid Presbyterian mission hall in a mews over a garage, where the Russians are allowed once a fortnight to have the Liturgy. A very stage property iconostasis and a few modern icons. A dirty floor to kneel on and a form along the wall . . . And in this two superb old priests and a

* Words sung at the Great Entrance in the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts.

deacon, clouds of incense, and at the Anaphora, an overwhelming supernatural impression.*

There is yet a third characteristic of Orthodoxy which the story of Vladimir's envoys illustrates. When they wanted to discover the true faith, the Russians did not ask about moral rules or demand a reasoned statement of doctrine, but watched the different nations at prayer. The Orthodox approach to religion is fundamentally a liturgical approach, which understands doctrine in the context of divine worship: it is no coincidence that the word 'Orthodoxy' should signify alike right belief and right worship, for the two things are inseparable. It has been truly said of the Byzantines, 'Dogma with them is not only an intellectual system apprehended by the clergy and expounded to the laity, but a field of vision wherein all things on earth are seen in their relation to things in heaven, first and foremost through liturgical celebration.† In the words of Georges Florovsky, 'Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second.‡ Those who wish to know about Orthodoxy should not so much read books as follow the example of Vladimir's retinue and attend the Liturgy. As Christ said to Andrew, 'Come and see' (John i, 39).

Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-fulfilment in worship. Into the Holy Liturgy which expresses their faith, the Orthodox peoples have poured their whole religious experience. It is the Liturgy which has inspired their best poetry, art, and music. Among Orthodox, the Liturgy has never become the preserve of the learned and the clergy, as it tended to be in the medieval west, but it has remained *popular* – the common possession of the whole Christian people:

The normal Orthodox lay worshipper, through familiarity from earliest childhood, is entirely at home in church, thoroughly conversant

* *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, p. 248.

† George Every, *The Byzantine Patriarchate* (London 1947), p. ix.

‡ 'The Elements of Liturgy in the Orthodox Catholic Church', in the periodical *One Church*, vol. XIII (New York 1959), nos. 1-2, p. 24.

with the audible parts of the Holy Liturgy, and takes part with unconscious and unstudied ease in the action of the rite, to an extent only shared in by the hyper-devout and ecclesiastically minded in the west.*

In the dark days of their history – under the Mongols, the Turks, or the Communists – it is to the Holy Liturgy that the Orthodox peoples have always turned for inspiration and new hope; nor have they turned in vain.

THE OUTWARD SETTING OF THE SERVICES: PRIEST AND PEOPLE

The basic pattern of services is the same in the Orthodox as in the Roman Catholic Church: there is, first the *Holy Liturgy* (the Eucharist or Mass); secondly, the *Divine Office* (i.e. the two chief offices of Matins and Vespers, together with the Midnight Office, the First, Third, Sixth and Ninth Hours, and Compline);† and thirdly, the *Occasional Offices* – i.e. services intended for special occasions, such as Baptism, Marriage, Monastic Profession, Royal Coronation, Consecration of a Church, Burial of the Dead. In addition to these, the Orthodox Church makes use of a great variety of lesser blessings.

While in many Anglican and almost all Roman Catholic parish churches, the Eucharist is celebrated daily, in the Orthodox Church today a daily Liturgy is not usual except in cathedrals and large monasteries; in a normal parish church it is celebrated only on Sundays and feasts. But in contemporary Russia, where places of worship are few and many Christians are obliged to work on Sundays, a daily Liturgy has become the practice in many town parishes.

In its services the Orthodox Church uses the language of the

* Austin Oakley, *The Orthodox Liturgy* (London 1958), p. 12. But I fear that his picture of us Orthodox is overidealized!

† In the Roman rite Nocturns (the equivalent of the Byzantine Midnight Office) is a part of Matins, but in the Byzantine rite the Midnight Office is a separate service. Byzantine Matins is equivalent to Matins and Lauds in the Roman rite.

people: Arabic in Antioch, Finnish in Helsinki, Japanese in Tokyo, English (when required) in London or New York. One of the first tasks of Orthodox missionaries – from Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century, to Innocent Veniaminov and Nicolas Kassatkin in the nineteenth – has always been to translate the service books into native tongues. In practice, however, there are partial exceptions to this general principle of using the vernacular; the Greek-speaking Churches employ, not modern Greek, but the Greek of New Testament and Byzantine times, while the Russian Church still uses the medieval translations in Church Slavonic. In 1906 many Russian bishops in fact recommended that Church Slavonic be replaced more or less generally by modern Russian, but the Bolshevik Revolution occurred before this scheme could be carried into effect.

In the Orthodox Church today, as in the early Church, all services are sung or chanted. There is no Orthodox equivalent to the Roman 'Low Mass' or to the Anglican 'Said Celebration'. At every Liturgy, as at every Matins and Vespers, incense is used and the service is sung, even though there may be no choir or congregation, but the priest and a single reader alone. In their Church music the Greek-speaking Orthodox continue to use the ancient Byzantine plain-chant, with its eight 'tones'. This plain-chant the Byzantine missionaries took with them into the Slavonic lands, but over the centuries it has become extensively modified, and the various Slavonic Churches have each developed their own style and tradition of ecclesiastical music. Of these traditions the Russian is the best known and the most immediately attractive to western ears; many consider Russian Church music the finest in all Christendom, and alike in Russia itself and in the emigration there are justly celebrated Russian choirs. Until very recent times all singing in Orthodox churches was usually done by the choir; today, a small but increasing number of parishes in Greece, Russia, Romania, and the west are beginning to revive congregational singing – if not throughout the service, then at any rate at special moments such as the Creed and the Lord's Prayer.

In the Orthodox Church today, as in the early Church, singing is unaccompanied and instrumental music is not found, except among certain Orthodox in America – particularly the Greeks – who are now

showing a *penchant* for the organ or the harmonium. Most Orthodox do not use hand or sanctuary bells inside the church; but they have outside belfries, and take great delight in ringing the bells not only before but at various moments during the service itself. Russian bell-ringing used to be particularly famous. 'Nothing,' wrote Paul of Aleppo during his visit to Moscow in 1655, 'nothing affected me so much as the united clang of all the bells on the eves of Sundays and great festivals, and at midnight before the festivals. The earth shook with their vibrations, and like thunder the drone of their voices went up to the skies.' 'They rang the brazen bells after their custom. May God not be startled at the noisy pleasantness of their sounds!'

An Orthodox Church is usually more or less square in plan, with a wide central space covered by a dome. (In Russia the church dome has assumed that striking onion shape which forms so characteristic a feature of every Russian landscape.) The elongated naves and chancels, common in cathedrals and larger parish churches of the Gothic style, are not found in eastern church architecture. In the past it was not the custom to have chairs or pews in the central part of the church, although there might be benches or stalls along the walls; but sadly in recent years there has been an increasing tendency, alike in Greece and in the west, to clutter the entire church with rows of seats. Yet even so it is still the normal practice for an Orthodox to stand during the greater part of the church service (non-Orthodox visitors are often astonished to see old women remaining on their feet for several hours without apparent signs of fatigue); but there are moments when the congregation can sit or kneel. Canon xx of the first Ecumenical Council forbids all kneeling on Sundays or on any of the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, but today this rule is unfortunately not always strictly observed.

It is a remarkable thing how great a difference the presence or absence of pews can make to the whole spirit of Christian worship. There is in Orthodox worship a flexibility, an unself-conscious informality, not found among western congregations, at any rate north of the Alps. Western worshippers, ranged in their neat rows, all in their proper places, cannot move about during the service without causing

* *The Travels of Macarius*, ed. Ridding, p. 27 and p. 6.

a disturbance; a western congregation is generally expected to arrive at the beginning and to stay to the end. But in Orthodox worship people can come and go far more freely, and nobody is greatly surprised if they move about during the service. The same informality and freedom also characterizes the behaviour of the clergy: ceremonial movements are not so minutely prescribed as in the west, priestly gestures are less stylized and more natural. This informality, while it can lead at times to irreverence, is in the end a precious quality which Orthodox would be most sorry to lose. They are at home in their church – not troops on a parade ground, but children in their Father's house. Orthodox worship is often termed 'otherworldly', but could more truly be described as 'homely': it is a *family* affair. Yet behind this homeliness and informality there lies a deep sense of mystery.

In every Orthodox church the sanctuary is divided from the rest of the interior by the *iconostasis*, a solid screen, usually of wood, covered with panel icons. In early days the chancel was separated merely by a low screen three or four feet high. Sometimes this screen was surmounted by an open series of columns supporting a horizontal beam or architrave: a screen of this kind can still be seen at St Mark's, Venice. Only in comparatively recent times – in many places not until the fifteenth or sixteenth century – was the space between these columns filled up, and the iconostasis given its present solid form. Many Orthodox liturgists today would be glad to follow St John of Kronstadt's example, and revert to a more open type of iconostasis; in a few places this has actually been done.

The iconostasis is pierced by three doors. The large door in the centre – the *Holy* or *Royal Door* – when opened affords a view through to the altar. This door is closed by double gates, behind which hangs a curtain. Outside service time, except during Easter week, the gates are kept closed and the curtain drawn. During services, at particular moments the gates are sometimes open, sometimes closed, while occasionally when the gates are closed the curtain is drawn across as well. Many Greek parishes, however, now no longer close the gates or draw the curtain at any point in the Liturgy; in a number of churches the gates have been removed altogether, while other churches have followed a course which is liturgically far more correct – keeping the

gates, but removing the curtain. Of the two other doors, that on the left leads into the 'chapel' of the *Prothesis* or Preparation (here the sacred vessels are kept, and here the priest prepares the bread and the wine at the beginning of the Liturgy); that on the right leads into the *Diakonikon* (now generally used as a vestry, but originally the place where the sacred books, particularly the Book of the Gospels, were kept together with the relics). Laypeople are not allowed to go behind the iconostasis, except for a special reason such as serving at the Liturgy. The altar in an Orthodox Church – the Holy Table or Throne, as it is called – stands free of the east wall, in the centre of the sanctuary; behind the altar and against the wall is set the bishop's throne.

Orthodox churches are full of icons – on the screen, on the walls, in special shrines, or on a kind of desk where they can be venerated by the faithful. When Orthodox people enter a church, their first action will be to buy a candle, go up to an icon, cross themselves, kiss the icon, and light the candle in front of it. 'They be great offerers of candles,' commented the English merchant Richard Chancellor, visiting Russia in the reign of Elizabeth I. In the decoration of the church, the various iconographical scenes and figures are not arranged fortuitously, but according to a definite theological scheme, so that the whole edifice forms one great icon or image of the Kingdom of God. In Orthodox religious art, as in the religious art of the medieval west, there is an elaborate system of symbols, involving every part of the church building and its decoration. Icons, frescoes, and mosaics are not mere ornaments, designed to make the church 'look nice', but have a theological and liturgical function to fulfil.

The icons which fill the church serve as a point of meeting between heaven and earth. As each local congregation prays Sunday by Sunday, surrounded by the figures of Christ, the angels, and the saints, these visible images remind the faithful unceasingly of the invisible presence of the whole company of heaven at the Liturgy. The faithful can feel that the walls of the church open out upon eternity, and they are helped to realize that their Liturgy on earth is one and the same with the great Liturgy of heaven. The multitudinous icons express visibly the sense of 'heaven on earth'.

The worship of the Orthodox Church is communal and popular.

Any non-Orthodox who attends Orthodox services with some frequency will quickly realize how closely the whole worshipping community, priest and people alike, are bound together into one; among other things, the absence of pews helps to create a sense of unity. Although most Orthodox congregations do not join in the singing, it should not therefore be imagined that they are taking no real part in the service; nor does the iconostasis – even in its present solid form – make the people feel cut off from the priest in the sanctuary. In any case, many of the ceremonies take place in front of the screen, in full view of the congregation.

There is in most Orthodox worship an unhurried and timeless quality, an effect produced in part by the constant repetition of *Litanies*. Either in a longer or a shorter form, the Litany recurs several times in every service of the Byzantine rite. In these Litanies, the deacon (if there is no deacon, the priest) calls the people to pray for the various needs of the Church and the world, and to each petition the choir or the people reply *Lord, have mercy* – *Kyrie eleison* in Greek, *Gospodi pomilui* in Russian – probably the first words in an Orthodox service which the visitor grasps. (In some Litanies the response is changed to *Grant this, O Lord*.) The congregation associate themselves with the different intercessions by making the sign of the Cross and bowing. In general the sign of the Cross is employed far more frequently by Orthodox than by western worshippers, and there is a greater freedom about the times when it is used: different worshippers cross themselves at different moments, each as he or she wishes, although there are of course occasions in the service when almost all sign themselves at the same time.

We have described Orthodox worship as timeless and unhurried. Most western people have the idea that Byzantine services, even if not literally timeless, are at any rate of an extreme and intolerable length. Certainly Orthodox functions tend to be more prolonged than their western counterparts, but we must not exaggerate. It is perfectly possible to celebrate the Byzantine Liturgy, and to preach a short sermon, in an hour and a quarter; and in 1943 the Patriarch of Constantinople laid down that in parishes under his jurisdiction the Sunday Liturgy should not last over an hour and a half. Russians on the whole take

longer than Greeks over services, but in a normal Russian parish of the emigration, the Vigil Service on Saturday nights lasts no more than two hours, and often less. Monastic offices of course are more extended, and on Mount Athos at great festivals the service sometimes goes on for twelve or even fifteen hours without a break, but this is altogether exceptional.

Non-Orthodox may take heart from the fact that Orthodox are often as alarmed as they by the length of services. 'And now we are entered on our travail and anguish,' writes Paul of Aleppo in his diary as he enters Russia. 'For all their churches are empty of seats. There is not one, even for the bishop; you see the people all through the service standing like rocks, motionless or incessantly bending with their devotions. God help us for the length of their prayers and chants and Masses, for we suffered great pain, so that our very souls were tortured with fatigue and anguish.' And in the middle of Holy Week he exclaims, 'God grant us His special aid to get through the whole of this present week! As for the Muscovites, their feet must surely be of iron.'*

* *The Travels of Macarius*, ed. Ridding, p. 14 and p. 46.

14 Orthodox Worship, II: The Sacraments

He who was visible as our Redeemer has now passed into
the sacraments.

St Leo the Great

The chief place in Christian worship belongs to the sacraments or, as they are called in Greek, the *mysteries*. 'It is called a mystery,' writes St John Chrysostom of the Eucharist, 'because what we believe is not the same as what we see, but we see one thing and believe another . . . When I hear the Body of Christ mentioned, I understand what is said in one sense, the unbeliever in another.'* This double character, at once outward and inward, is the distinctive feature of a sacrament: the sacraments, like the Church, are both visible and invisible; in every sacrament there is the combination of an outward visible sign with an inward spiritual grace. At Baptism the Christian undergoes an outward washing in water and is at the same time cleansed inwardly from sin; at the Eucharist he or she receives what appears from the visible point of view to be bread and wine but in reality is the Body and Blood of Christ.

In most of the sacraments the Church takes material things – water, bread, wine, oil – and makes them a vehicle of the Spirit. In this way the sacraments look back to the Incarnation, when Christ took material flesh and made it a vehicle of the Spirit; and they look forward to, or rather they anticipate, the *apocatastasis* and the final redemption of matter at the Last Day. Orthodoxy rejects any attempt

* *Homilies on I Corinthians*, vii, 1 (P.G. lxi, 55).