

The Mission of the Orthodox Church in North America

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Jesus Christ sends his Church into the world for the same purpose that God the Father sent him. The Church, with Jesus its head, exists to manifest God as fully and completely as is now possible to humans until Christ returns in glory to establish God's reign in the universe.

The Church's mission in North America today is gravely complicated and debilitated by massive confusion and disagreement about Christ; his person, his gospel and his Church. For the Church's mission to be achieved, therefore, requires that certain convictions about Jesus be accepted, and certain actions accomplished. **Begin with Jesus**

Everyone in the Church -- first of all her clergy and lay leaders -- must be convinced that everything in the Church begins and ends with Jesus. This may seem too obvious to say, but it must be emphasized since it is so easily forgotten and so often betrayed.

In many Orthodox Churches and church institutions in North America today Christ and his gospel serve merely as a pretext for a variety of religious, ecclesiastical, social and political ideas and activities which have little, if anything, to do with the Lord's mission in the world. These ideas and activities may be old-fashioned or modern, spiritualistic or secular, relativistic or sectarian, political or pietistic. They may also be sophisticated or simplistic, intellectual or popular, refined or vulgar. But whatever or however they are, they are not rooted in Jesus Christ as he really is. Nor are they guided and guarded by the gospel image and teaching of and about Jesus and God. Nor are they inspired, instructed and informed by the Holy Spirit who is always and everywhere the Spirit of God and of Christ.

Since the Church's mission is Christ's own, it always begins with the person and doctrine of Jesus proclaimed in the synoptic gospels, the Church's basic kerygma. Mission does not begin with theology, even the Church's "original theology" recorded in the Gospel according to St. John. Nor does it begin with dogma or liturgy, spirituality or piety, mysticism or activism.

To be Orthodox Christians, men and women must first encounter Jesus in his humanity. They must hear his messianic words and see his messianic signs. They must come to confess him as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:18). And they must behold him crucified. Only then can they come to know and believe in him as the risen Lord. And only then can they confess and worship him as God's incarnate Word, one of the Holy Trinity; the one by, in and for whom all things are made; the theanthropic Master and Head of the universe.

That Christian faith and life originates with the man Jesus is of supreme importance for Orthodox missionary activity. This rule applies as much for missionary work among the "cradle Orthodox" who have been raised in the Church from infancy as it does to adult men and women who enter the Orthodox Church from outside, whatever their background, knowledge and experience. Before everything else, members of the Orthodox Church are "members of Christ" (1 Cor 6:15). They must, therefore, know Christ as he really is and accept him as such. **Christ and the Scriptures**

To know Jesus Christ is to receive him as he appears in the Church's canonical gospels and as he is proclaimed and explained in the Church's canonized writings of the New Testament. Whatever actually happened historically (and who can really know?), the real Christ for the Orthodox Church is the Christ of the gospels and Acts; the Christ of the writings attributed to the apostles John and Paul, and Peter and James and Jude. There is no other Christ for the Orthodox Church. A Christ produced by scholars, mystics, poets or politicians -- or even by creative theologians, charismatic elders or crusading activists within or without the Church -- is never the real and whole Christ of Orthodox doctrine, liturgy, spirituality and sanctity. He is surely not the Christ of Orthodox mission.

To know the real Christ requires a diligent and critical study of the Bible. Before anything else, Christians are disciples, i.e. students (mathetai). They are students of Christ before they are his "members" as members of his Church. They are his disciples before they are his apostles and missionaries (i.e., "those who are sent"). And they are certainly his

disciples before they are bishops, presbyters, elders, and theologians of his Church.

Jesus appears in the gospel narrative first as rabbi, master and teacher (didaskolos, magister). He instructs his students in the right understanding of the old testament writings. Risen from the dead he opens the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures and explains to them how "the law, the psalms and the prophets" speak about him (cf. Lk 24).

Critical study of scriptures is a reading and hearing of the biblical words without prejudging or predetermining their meaning. Through such study the student (who may in some circumstances be unable to read) wants to know what the writings actually say and mean, first for those who originally wrote and heard them, and then for people today, beginning with oneself. Such study uses all available means to illumine and explain (but not to constitute or determine) the biblical texts as written and received in the Church. It employs, for example, the knowledge of languages, literature, history, religion, geography and archeology. It welcomes the guidance of those skilled in such fields. But though this study is done within the Church community with the help of others, it must be done for oneself. Each individual believer must personally engage God's Word in the Bible. Without such engagement, especially today in North America, and especially by the Church's leaders, there is no genuine Orthodox mission. Bible and Liturgy

The hearing and reading of the Bible essential to Orthodox missionary work occurs in the context of the Church's self-actualization in corporate worship, i.e. the liturgy. The Church assembled in Christ's name before the Face of God in the Holy Spirit for instruction, petition, praise, remembrance and thanksgiving is the hermeneutical condition and context for interpreting God's Word recorded in the scriptures. As such, it is the point from which the Church's apostolic mission originates and the point toward which its activity is directed.

Not only is the Bible read, heard, contemplated and explained at Church services, but the services themselves are thoroughly biblical in content, form and spirit. Biblically informed believers have an immediate awareness and experience of the Bible's message in Orthodox liturgical worship. Or rather, more accurately, the God and Christ witnessed in the Bible become immediately accessible to believers in liturgical contemplation and communion in the Church.

Without a biblical foundation, what Fr. Georges Florovsky called "the scriptural mind" (whose loss he lamented), Orthodox liturgy degenerates into just about anything but true Christian worship. It becomes in North America for example, pathetic attempts to recreate romanticized versions of church services and devotion of other places and times. Or it becomes enforced enactments of ritual rules and regulation rigidly performed by rigorous defenders of "the right way of doing things" (whatever that "right way" might be). Or it becomes religio-cultural folk celebrations with all desired words, movements, melodies, colors and sounds, (often recorded on the latest audio-visual equipment) performed for the enjoyment and comfort of its participants and observers. But whatever it becomes, it is no longer the logiki latreia in spirit and truth of Orthodox Christian liturgical worship.

For Orthodox mission to be real and true, those outside the Orthodox Church must enter her liturgical and sacramental communion, and grow within it, by way of God's Word incarnate by the Holy Spirit "in words" in the Bible and "in person" as Jesus of Nazareth. And only those already firmly established in this spiritual way can lead others into its divine reality. Spirituality and Theology

As authentic Orthodox liturgy is rooted in Christ's gospel and guided by the Church's scriptures, and, as such, serves as the hermeneutical setting for understanding the Bible, so too is Christian spirituality and morality. A separation of spiritual practice and ethical behavior from their biblical roots is one of the greatest dangers for Orthodox mission -- and for Church life generally -- in North America today. It is certainly not less dangerous than a separation of biblical studies from liturgical worship and spiritual striving.

Many men and women in North America today are avidly interested in Orthodox spirituality. They consume Orthodox ascetical, mystical and hagiographical literature. They practice forms of fasting, vigil and prayer described in classical Orthodox writings. They make prostrations, venerate icons, visit monasteries and seek out elders. They participate in Orthodox liturgical worship. When they are not members of the Orthodox Church, they often become members. Some even join monastic communities. But it often happens that these people are not deeply instructed in biblical doctrine, and may not even be that interested in it. When this is the case, the results are not sane and sober Orthodox Christianity but a variety of superficial and unstable, if not plainly sectarian and idiosyncratic, "Orthodoxies."

The Orthodox Church's missionary activity is beneficial and fruitful for such men and women when the Church's apophatic, mystical theology and spirituality are firmly grounded in her cataphatic biblical teaching. It succeeds when Orthodox believers -- both those who preach and those who hear -- are convinced that God's uncreated light and wisdom is Christ himself. It works when the Holy Spirit is always and everywhere identified with the Spirit of Christ who spoke by the prophets, established the priesthood and inspired the scriptures. It produces real Christians when transfiguration and deification are sought and found, as only they can be, through co-crucifixion with Jesus in the mortification of sinful passions by taking up one's cross and keeping the commandments of God.

In genuine Orthodox Christian missionary activity, Tabor never replaces Golgotha as the center of Christian preaching and piety, just as Mark the Ascetic never supersedes Mark the Evangelist or Isaiah the Solitary -- Isaiah the prophet. Missionary work is truly Orthodox when the sayings of Paul the Simple and John the Dwarf are sought and heard in submission to the saying of their teachers and guides, Paul, the apostle to the gentiles and John, the Lord's beloved disciple and theologian.

In order for Orthodox missionary activity to be genuine and true especially in view of the widespread interest in Orthodox spirituality, great care and responsibility must be exercised in the Church's use of the fathers and saints. Patristic theology, with the writings of the fathers and saints, which is now so popular and fashionable (and marketable!) in North America, is often presented consciously or unconsciously in ways which allow it to be used improperly. Patristic theology becomes a kind of "thing-in-itself" detached from its biblical foundation, ecclesial setting and historical context. It becomes for example, a theological or spiritual "school," or a metaphysical, mystical "worldview," disengaged from the Church and the gospel of Christ.

In such a misuse of patristic and hagiographic material, Jesus Christ may hardly be mentioned and becomes of little interest or importance. At other times the fathers are presented as mystical, perhaps even infallible, oracles who all allegedly say the same things. What can result is what Fr. John Meyendorff called a patristic "mythology," or a patristic "fundamentalism" which are radically contrary to what the fathers themselves, each in his own way, actually believed and taught.

There is certainly a "mind of the fathers" which the Orthodox Church identifies with the "mind of the Church," and even the "mind of Christ." It is the "scriptural mind" mentioned above. It is the attitude and approach to God and all reality in God, as revealed ultimately and definitively in Jesus Christ. To "follow the fathers" is to follow their path of obedience to God's gospel concerning Jesus. It is to do what they did, in the same spirit and way. It is not simply to repeat their words or quote their writings with little knowledge, discrimination or respect.

Orthodox missionary activity requires that preaching and teaching about the deep and difficult doctrines which the church fathers forged out in the heat of impassioned theological and spiritual controversy, often in the midst of great social, political, cultural, economic and even military turmoil, be done with extreme reverence and responsibility. It cannot be done quickly or easily. It cannot be done at all by those without training, guidance, engagement and experience. This is a teaching of the fathers and saints themselves. When this rule is disregarded or violated, it results in the "missionaries" leading people more into temptation than into God's kingdom, making them if not "twice as much a child of hell" (Mt 23:15) as they are themselves, surely twice as much children of confusion and fantasy. Slaves of All

The Church's mission is accomplished by those who with Jesus have made themselves the slaves of all for the sake of the gospel. Only those who have emptied themselves of everything their own and who live in unconditional obedience to God for the salvation of all can be apostles of Christ. Only those who identify totally with those to whom they are sent, taking their sins upon themselves and advocating for them before God without judgement can preach and prophesy in Jesus' name without self-condemnation. Only those willing and enabled by God's grace to suffer all things in love for Christ, the gospel and those to whom the gospel is given are those sent by the Lord.

The perfect example of apostleship for the Church is always St. Paul. And the perfect description of the Church's mission is forever to be found in St. Paul's letters, especially those to the Corinthians who in many ways resemble not only the neophytes in North American Orthodox Churches today, but us old-timers as well. St. Paul defends his apostleship to the divided, factious, litigious, carnal, conjugally troubled, sexually confused, spiritually hedonistic, disorderly and disbelieving Corinthians by recounting his sufferings. He presents his afflictions, persecutions, temptations and trials as proof that he is sent by the Lord Jesus. He boasts that he asks and takes nothing from anyone. He does not hide or deny his problems. He does not pretend to be what he is not. He flaunts his foolishness and weakness. He broadcasts his many graces. He numbers himself with the apostles who have "renounced under handed ways" and "refuse to practise cunning or the tamper with God's Word, but by an open statement of the truth . . . commend (themselves) to every person's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2). He is with Christ's ambassadors who are "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. ..." (2 Cor 4:8-9). He describes real apostles as those whom people can consider only as the "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God ... fools for Christ's sake ... the refuse of the world, the off-scouring of all things" who "bless when reviled, endure when persecuted, conciliate when slandered." (1 Cor 4:1, 9-13)

Finally the apostle Paul, with all who are chosen and sent by God, claims to be totally free. He has no selfish interests or self-serving motivations in his mission. He wants nothing for himself except to be saved. And even then he wishes that he could be accursed and cut off from Christ for the salvation of his brethren (Rom 9:3). He is God's slave, the slave of Christ and the gospel, the slave of all to whom he has become all things so that by all means he might serve for the salvation of some.

"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel ... for though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all ... to the Jews I became as a Jew ... to those under the law I became as one under the law ... to those outside the law I

became one outside the law ... to the weak I became weak ... I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:16, 19-23).

The missionary mind and method described in St. Paul's letters is largely absent from Orthodox Churches in North America today. For the most part church leaders and activists, clergy and laity alike, appear singularly interested in gaining customers for their particular brand of "Orthodoxy" who will then support the style of church life and activity that they themselves want. We in North America rarely reach out to others for their sake, on their terms, with sensitivity and sympathy for their ideas, experiences, concerns and needs, in order to win them to Christ and the gospel. We more frequently seek them for our own sake, on our terms, in order to get from them what we want for ourselves -- which may range from earthly power and prestige, to spiritual self-satisfaction and consolation, to followers for our particular cause or crusade, to warm, wealthy bodies to populate and maintain our church properties. We easily do this when we identify what we want with the Church's mission, which we easily do; and when we fail to see ourselves, and our ideas, actions and desires, in the light of the wholeness and fulness of Christ and the Church. We also easily do this when we no longer see ourselves as sinners in need of salvation to whom Christ's mission is primarily directed. Begin with Oneself

Only those being saved by faith in Christ through God's grace are empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve as apostles. They never cease working out their salvation in fear and trembling before God who wills and works in them for his good pleasure, which is that all people might be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

Those being saved by grace through Christ and the Holy Spirit take every thought captive for the sake of Christ and crucify their flesh with its passions and desires, lest they who preach to others themselves be disqualified. They beg God for the fruit of the Holy Spirit so that, having preached and prophesied and healed and restored -- and perhaps even worked miracles in the name of Christ -- they may not hear the awesome words of the Master on the day of judgement. "I never knew you, depart from me, you evildoers" (Mt 7:23). Filled with love and compassion for those to whom they are sent and whose cause they plead before God, such missionaries and apostles are ready to use everything the Lord provides in order to share with others what they have received. They cannot do otherwise. The love of God compels them. They are God's slaves, and the slaves of all with Jesus Christ, in perfect freedom. Joyfully, gratefully and eagerly they become all things to all people that by all means at least some may be saved through their service.

We can be confident that God, who never leaves himself without witnesses, will find such people to carry on the mission of the Orthodox Church in North America today. We trust in the promises of Christ.

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