

The Narrow Way of Orthodoxy

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... narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be who find it (Mt 7:14)

The holy fathers teach us never to give advice unless we are asked. On this principle I might dare to offer some words of advice to you from our North American Orthodox experience since you have kindly invited me to contribute to this festschrift honoring His Grace Dr. Antonie Plamadeala. But I cannot be so bold. I have no advice to offer you. Rather I will share with you some of my convictions about Orthodox Church life in a democratic, pluralistic society. These convictions result from the experiences of two centuries of Orthodox Church history in North America; most especially from our American experiences of the past seventy-five years, for more than thirty of which I have served as an Orthodox priest, pastor and professor of theology.

In sharing my convictions with you, I have no intention to teach you. I hope rather to stimulate your reflections by imitating those whom St. John Climacus describes. These are they who are sinking in the mud and call out to others to warn them not to fall into the same predicament (cf. Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 26, 14). I pray that my words will be helpful.

"I Am A Christian"

When the early Christian martyrs were brought before their persecutors they often answered the threats of their torturers with the simple words: "I am a Christian!"

The first Christian believers had no earthly identity. They were dead to this world. They belonged to God's kingdom. In their homelands they were aliens. In foreign lands they were at home. They belonged everywhere and nowhere for they were "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19)

By virtue of their having been baptised into Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, thereby becoming participants in the eucharistic supper of God's kingdom, the believers in the Holy Trinity had died to this world. Their lives were now "hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). They identified themselves -- fundamentally and essentially -- no longer as Greeks or Jews, slaves or freemen, barbarians or Scythians, or even as men and women. (Gal 3:27-28, Col 3:11). They were now Christians (Acts 11:26): "... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9).

This was the spiritual consciousness of Orthodox Christians in the apostolic Church, the consciousness of the Church's saints throughout the ages. This was their deepest personal experience and their steadfast conviction as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.

This consciousness, experience and conviction has to a large degree been lost by the great majority of Orthodox Christians now living in North America. How few there be -- even among the bishops and priests -- who have this fundamental, essential identity of being Orthodox Christians who belong to the one true Church which is, here and now, the foretaste God's kingdom to come for peoples of all nations of the earth.

For the most part we Orthodox in North America view our church membership primarily in terms of our ancestry as Albanians, Bulgarians, Carpatho-Russians, Greeks, Romanians, Russians, Serbians, Syrians, Ukrainians. ... We identify ourselves and our churches in this way. And we are looked upon in this way by the Churches of the old countries which often consider us to be an ecclesiastical "diaspora" no matter how long we have been living in the United States and Canada as citizens of these countries in Orthodox churches which have been here for centuries.

We in the United States and Canada are divided into many ecclesiastical "jurisdictions" on the basis of nationality, ethnicity and political ideology. We claim that we are one and the same Orthodox Church, and in liturgical rites and creedal statements we are. But we openly and shamelessly use our ecclesiastical structures for nationalistic, cultural, ethnic and ideological ends. We employ our church buildings as shrines of national heritages, museums for cultural exhibitions, concert halls for ethnic performances, training centers for languages and customs, meeting places for patriotic and political programs and activities. We are free to do so. We have religious and political liberty.

If we North Americans dislike what is being done in our church, we can go across the street with like-minded people and open another church of our own, even calling it Orthodox. This has happened, again and again. The result is ecclesiastical and spiritual chaos, disorder, hostility, competition, opportunism ... and a steady decline in church membership in the churches without significant immigration of Orthodox peoples from the "old countries", together with an almost total loss of evangelistic and missionary consciousness and activity.

Except for a faithful few who strive to follow the narrow way which leads to life, we members of Orthodox churches in North America have largely lost our basic identity and consciousness as Orthodox Christians. We do not identify ourselves first and foremost, not to say essentially and exclusively, as Christians - Orthodox Christians who also happen to be of one or another national background and ethnic heritage. And we certainly do not organize and administer our church life on the sacred Orthodox principle which calls for unity and cooperation among all Orthodox believers living in the same -- and related -- territories and nations.

From 1794 when the Orthodox missionaries first came to Alaska, until the early decades of this century Orthodox Christians in North America were in one unified church. But since that time, especially after the Bolshevik revolution, the North American missionary diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church splintered into many factions and groups. And this is how we Orthodox still exist.

Recent events in your new countries fill some of us with sorrow and fear. We see you sinking into the state into which we have fallen. Will there be even a few Orthodox Christians among you who will follow the hard and narrow way of Christ which is uncompromisingly opposed to the broad and easy way of ecclesiastical division and schism because of nationalistic, ethnic, chauvinistic, political, ideological and personal passions and interests which leads to destruction, both here and in the age to come? Will there be at least some who say: "I am a Christian; I am Orthodox. I belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ. I am of one mind, one heart, one soul, and one body with all those who belong to Christ and the Church, whatever their nationality and political opinions. I stand steadfastly opposed to those who use Christ's Church for any secular, nationalistic, ideological or political purpose, however apparently noble and justifiable."?

The future of Orthodoxy depends on the few in all countries of the earth who follow the narrow way which insists that the Orthodox Church must be the Church and nothing but the Church: the presence and foretaste of God's kingdom on earth for all peoples who wish to enter and be saved.

Church and Society

The Orthodox Church is not of this world. But the Church is in the world for the sake of its salvation.

For God has so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (Jn 3:16-17).

The Lord Jesus Christ said that he is "the living bread which came down from heaven", the Son of God who gives his own flesh and blood "for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51).

The Orthodox Church can never be identified with this world. It is the presence of God's kingdom in this world until Christ comes again in glory at the end of the ages to establish God's kingdom throughout the whole of creation. But the Church is in the world for the sake of the world's life and salvation.

The narrow way which leads to life forbids Orthodox Christians to follow the destructive way of identifying Christ's Church with any particular social, political, economic or military policy. It forbids anyone from using Christ's Church for any worldly purposes in any way at all. But the narrow way which leads to life also forbids Orthodox Christians from the broad and easy way of withdrawal from direct involvement in the social, political, economic and even military activities of the nations in which they live. It forbids them from the destructive way of turning Christ's Church into a self-interested, self-enclosed sectarian cult having nothing to do with the world for which Christ was crucified and glorified, except to treat it with scorn and derision as something wicked which lies outside God's saving love and concern.

Orthodox bishops and priests, by virtue of their ordination and calling, may not hold worldly positions and participate directly in secular affairs. They may not serve in political offices, manage economic policies or participate in military actions. Such activity is forbidden to the clergy by the Church's canons. But the Church's pastors and teachers are called to guide and direct Orthodox Christian laypeople in their calling to bring God's kingdom to every aspect of their daily life and work in the world by every possible means. The bishops and priests are called to instruct and inspire their believing people so that they can make social, political, economic and even military decisions and actions according to the teachings of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit; and that they would do so freely, humbly and honestly, with love and respect for those with whom they disagree, both within the Church and outside her borders.

There is no infallible Orthodox Church teaching on social, political, economic and military policies. This is an area for legitimate differences of opinion among people of good will, including Orthodox Christians. But the narrow way of Christ compels Orthodox laypeople to be involved in the life and work of their countries, and to do so as those belonging to God's kingdom not of this world, neither scorning the world which God loves and saves in His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, nor being swallowed up and consumed by the world to the point where the Church becomes nothing other than a tool for the worldly activities of passionate people devoid of true Christian faith and spiritual life.

How well we in North America know the broad and easy ways which lead to the destruction of both ecclesial and social life. How well we know the way of destructive sectarian withdrawal from the world to the point where there is virtually no Christian witness and impact in social, political, economic and military life at all. And how well we know the opposite way of destructive immersion within the activities of the world to the point where virtually all Christian witness and influence is lost. May the Lord preserve those in the newly emerging democratic countries of Europe and Asia from falling into either of these destructive ways which we in North America know only too well.

Liturgy and Life

The Orthodox Church is essentially a worshipping Church. We glory in our liturgical life and devotion. We love our services and sacraments, our rites and rituals, our customs and traditions. Liturgical life and worship have preserved the Orthodox Church and the faith of countless Orthodox Christians in the darkest hours of Moslem oppression and Marxist persecution, as well as in the painful conditions of immigrant life in the capitalistic countries of the new world where many Orthodox believers found themselves outside the mainstream of social, political and economic power and privilege.

But once again, this time in regard to the Church's liturgy, destructive temptations, which are always distortions of what is godly and good, confront Orthodox Christians. On the one hand there is the broad and easy way of turning the Church's worship into an self-enclosed cult providing an easy and comfortable escape from the life and activity of the world. And on the other hand there is the equally broad and easy way of making the liturgy nothing but the decorative and sentimental expression of national and cultural traditions and interests devoid of any power to provide a critical engagement of God's kingdom with the real lives of those who attend and participate, and a critical judgment of God's truth upon their attitudes and actions in their daily activities. We in North America know both of these broad and easy ways which lead to destruction.

According to Christ's narrow way which leads to life, the Church's liturgy provides both a critical judgment on life in this world, and a comforting empowerment for those called to live within the world though belonging already now to God's kingdom not of this world which will come in power at the end of the ages. The Church's liturgical services and sacraments enable and empower believers to experience here and now the truth and beauty of God's kingdom. They allow them already now to know by living experience the "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" which, according to the apostle Paul, "the kingdom of God is" (Rom 14:17).

In order to be what it is, the Church's liturgy must be, as the liturgical service itself says, "reasonable worship" (Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). It must be accessible and meaningful to its participants. The Church's liturgy must be connected to the real lives and experiences of real people. It cannot be the ritualistic enactment of ancient rites performed in a perfunctory manner in languages which no one really understands, according to measurements of time which nobody observes, by ministers who have little, if any, understanding or interest in the content of what they are doing and why. The Church's sacraments and services cannot be "mysteries" in the sense that they are mystifying, meaningless and nonsensical to those who perform and participate in them in quasi-magical and mechanical ways. Nor can they be given whatever meanings one wishes to give them by those who use them for their own subjective personal, religious, cultural, ideological and/or political purposes.

Our experience in North America shows that the Church's liturgy is truly the presence of God's kingdom on earth for those who seek and desire Christ's narrow way which leads to life. For those who believe in the Holy Trinity and desire "reasonable worship," the Orthodox liturgy is truly divine. It is not in need of radical revision or substantial reformation for those who by God's grace can discern what is divinely essential as opposed to what is humanly temporal and passing. But it is in need of continual spiritual renewal and practical updating regarding its external forms so that it may always be what it is: the living experience of God's kingdom for the faithful in the midst of the earth.

Our American experience demonstrates clearly that the Church's liturgy can be misused and abused. It can be frozen and fossilized. It can be nothing but a collection of irrelevant cultic rituals devoid of meaning, power and life. It can be the presence not of God's living kingdom in this present world, but the presence of a world long gone, the dead relic of a past time and place (usually somewhere in the 19th century, although some may prefer other no-longer-existing periods) in which no distinction is made between what is of God in the liturgy, and what is of man. When this occurs, people go to the church building as they go to a museum or theater: to see what people of another age looked like, how they spoke and sang, how they dressed and behaved . . . and, if they so choose (for any number of reasons), they can themselves imitate their actions. What happens in such cases, which are all-too-familiar to us in America, is that the Church's services and sacraments have little or nothing to do with present-day life in our contemporary world. And for some who

choose this broad and easy way, the less the Church's liturgy has to do with contemporary reality the better. The stranger and less understood and less accessible the liturgy is to normal people, the "more mystical" and "more Orthodox" it is considered to be.

Societies in which there is religious liberty are especially prone to producing massive variations in liturgical attitudes and practices which are not expressive of the rich and positive diversity inspired by God's Holy Spirit in the Church. These differences in practice are rather the sinful expressions of human predilection, opinion and passion. We know this well in the United States and Canada. We pray that you be spared this experience in your newly emerging countries, but we fear that human beings being what they are, those who want the narrow way which leads to life will, according to Christ's own words, be few.

May the Lord grant that the liturgical services and sacraments of the Orthodox Churches in the new countries of Europe and Asia be the true worship of God in spirit and in truth brought to the world by Jesus Christ and preserved in the Church by the Holy Spirit. God grant that Orthodox worship in these lands be according to Christ's narrow way which leads to life. May it not be, what we know too often and too well, the broad and easy way of the enactment of external forms and cultic rituals disconnected from the real lives of real people which leads to the destruction of people's lives, especially the majority of young people who expect the Church to have something directly to do with their spiritual aspirations, desires and needs.

And speaking of the youth, our experience has been that liturgical worship without catechetical instruction and the possibility to participate directly in Christian work and spiritual life produces no long-lasting fruits of the Holy Spirit. And neither does catechetical instruction and participation in activistic programs disconnected from well-prepared participation in the Church's liturgical life experienced as "reasonable worship."

Orthodox and Heterodox, Believers and Non-believers

Our experience in the United States and Canada, especially in recent years, has also revealed that on either side of Christ's narrow way concerning the relationship between Orthodox Christians and non-Orthodox, and between believers and non-believers, there exist two broad and easy ways, opposite to each other and equally pernicious and destructive.

One broad and easy way is to consider everyone and everything outside the Orthodox Church to be totally devoid of God's grace and goodness, totally untrue and totally evil. Those of this way consider Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians, as well members of the pre-Chalcedonian Oriental Churches (the Egyptian Copts, the Armenians, Ethiopians, and Syrian Christians of India) as not being Christians at all. They hold that their services and sacraments are wholly devoid of grace and truth, that there is nothing of God and the true Church of God in their doctrines and practices. They consider "ecumenism" to be heretically sinful, even when "ecumenism" is understood as all Orthodox Churches in the world today officially understand it, namely, as the work to overcome disagreements and divisions among Christians and Christian confessions and communities, to affirm unanimities and agreements where these actually exist, and to cooperate in practical activities whenever possible for the good of human beings, especially the poor, needy, afflicted, outcast and suffering. For those following this way, there can be no discussion or cooperation. There can only be condemnation and judgment of others which is often presented as the expression of Orthodox strictness, as the narrow way itself.

The opposite broad and easy way, also well known in the United States and Canada, is to consider that all Christian confessions and communities, and perhaps even all religious philosophies and movements, are essentially the same, or at least not different enough to matter in any important or significant manner. Those following this way view Orthodoxy as the cultural religious expression of the traditionally Orthodox peoples which is to be rigorously preserved by these nations for themselves. They would see no need for any theological dialogue with others, and no need for any missionary activity. Cooperation is usually welcome, especially if it serves the interests of the Orthodox.

The narrow way of Orthodoxy, however, rejects both these destructive and untrue ways. Orthodox Christians have always insisted that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, is the only true God. We have always insisted that Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son and Word and Image of this one true God who is his eternal Father. We have always held that Christ alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6), and that the Holy Spirit alone is the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:16, 15:26). We Orthodox have also always held that the Orthodox Church alone, among all Christian confessions and communities, is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ, "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15), Christ's very "body..the fulness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23). Having participated for many years in "ecumenical activity," including membership on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, I have never heard one Orthodox Christian participant in North America or abroad ever deny any of these sacred truths.

But Orthodox Christians have also always held -- and must continue to hold if we are true followers of Christ -- that every human person is made in God's image and likeness, that virtually no human person is wholly devoid of God's grace and

truth, that heterodox Christians and Christian confessions and communities do retain something of God and God's true Church (the so-called "vestiges of the Church": *vestigia ecclesiae*) in their doctrines and practices, and that individuals in these communities -- not in spite of them but because of them -- have sometimes attained extraordinary levels of righteousness and holiness. We Orthodox Christians also hold, according to the strict teachings of the Church's Holy Scriptures and Tradition, including the witness of the saints, that non-Christians and even non-believers are not wholly devoid of God's grace and truth. Because of their being made in God's image and likeness, we can converse with them and cooperate with them and witness to them of Christ -- and even learn some things from them -- precisely on these bases.

The Orthodox Church is the one true Church of Christ who is the only saving Truth for human beings and the whole of creation. As such, the fully committed members of Christ's Church are given the grace to discern whatever is of God, and to rejoice and give thanks for it, wherever, however and in whomever it happens to be. And we are also given the ability to discern what is not of the Lord, and to expose and reject it in the light of Christ who is Himself "the light of the world" (Jn 8:22), "the light which enlightens every person, who comes into the world." (Jn 1:9).

The hard and narrow way of Christ, the way of Orthodox Christianity which leads to life, lies between the two wide and easy ways to destruction: the way of religious sectarianism on the one side, where we consider everything outside of the Orthodox Church as nothing other than undifferentiated demonic darkness to be avoided at all costs; and the way of religious relativism on the other, where we would see no significant or substantial uniqueness in Orthodoxy, except for the fact that it is the traditional tribal religion of certain European, Middle Eastern and Asian peoples to be defended at all costs not only against those who would destroy it, but those who would wish to embrace it and accept it as their own.

We in the United States and Canada know all three ways. Many are the sectarians and relativists among the members of the North American Orthodox Churches, who follow these broad and easy ways. The pluralistic societies in which we live, in which there is such great and widespread spiritual conflict and complexity, strongly push us towards these false paths to which it is so easy to surrender and succumb. But happily there are also the few who follow the hard and narrow way of Christ and the Church. These are they who affirm the absolute truth of the Orthodox Faith and the fulness of life of the Orthodox Church which empowers them with the freedom, honesty and love to discern, affirm and rejoice in the presence and power of the Holy Trinity where and in whom such are to be found, while sadly exposing and rejecting all in which and in whom they are absent.

The Narrow Way of Orthodoxy

May the Orthodox Christians in Romania -- and indeed in North America and in all countries -- find and follow the way of Christ and the Church, which is the hard and narrow way of Orthodox Christianity. We can do so only by God's grace through sharing with one another. There is no infallible magisterium in Orthodoxy. No one person, bishop or local church possesses the whole truth on any given issue. And no individual, hierarch or church community is exempt from error. The Orthodox Church is a sobornal church. It is a church in which the Holy Spirit brings God's truth in Christ to the body of believers through the prayers and spiritual accomplishments of the saints. The Orthodox Church is a church in which human persons discover God's Truth by bearing each other's burdens, hearing each other's words, sharing each other's experiences, correcting each others faults, and benefiting from each other's wisdom.

The religious, political and economic liberties which we now all enjoy, and for which we give thanks, possess their own uniquely insidious forms of trial and temptation. We in the United States and Canada know this from long and painful experience. Our success in overcoming these temptations in uncompromising fidelity to the Lord has been minimal. Our only hope is that there will always be the faithful few among us who refuse to surrender to the broad and easy ways which lead to destruction. May these trials and temptations, which are historically new for you, and therefore especially enticing and attractive, prove to be as powerless over true Orthodox believers as were the atheistic forces of the past with their persecutions, imprisonments, and executions. May there always be among you, as hopefully among us, those who remain steadfastly faithful to God.

May our Lord -- the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit -- be with us all as we face the future together in these new world conditions. We ask your prayers, and offer ours, with deepest respect, admiration and love.