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The Orthodox Way of Life

by a Nun Abroad

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When asked by those interested to know more about Orthodoxy, the faithful often have recourse to such expressions as, "It's hard to explain, one has to live it," or "Orthodoxy is a way of life." Perhaps we should try and expand on this truth.

The difference in external behaviour between committed Orthodox and non-Orthodox is readily apparent. In worship the Orthodox cross themselves frequently, bow, make prostrations; they fast, kiss icons and relics—all of which appears strange to outsiders. The inner spiritual differences, which are naturally of far greater import, can only be felt or understood through long acquaintance with Orthodox believers, or by a diligent reading of the Fathers of the Church, whose teaching is a living guide to those conducting spiritual warfare, but we can learn something from these outward expressions.

In church one quickly becomes aware of the participation of the faithful throughout the service. It is part of a tradition handed down from generation to generation: parents trying to inculcate in their children attention to the prayers by ensuring that they cross themselves or bow at the correct times, taking care of such details as the correct holding of the fingers when making the sign of the Cross because of its religious significance (i.e. two fingers for Christ both God and man, and three fingers together for the Trinity), ensuring that they know how to ask a priestly blessing.

St Paul exhorts us to "pray without ceasing." This may seem to be impossible of attainment, yet we must surely strive towards this goal. The constant remembrance of God, feelings of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, contrition, are all wordless prayers. Through such constant remembrances an Orthodox tries to keep his heart close to God unceasingly, whether working, conversing, eating, travelling, or, with the most spiritual persons, even while sleeping. External acts, which gradually become habitual, help to remind one throughout the day. Let us take a few examples.

An Orthodox believer crosses himself with a brief silent prayer before work, before study, before travelling, before entering the church, when passing a cemetery, a church or a wayside cross. He makes the sign of the cross over his door as he leaves his house, over his bed before retiring to sleep, over an important letter before posting it, over his medicine. For him prayer is not something confined to Sunday worship. Apart from regular morning and evening prayers read in front of his icon corner, preferably with the whole family, in which remembrances are made of the living and the departed, short prayers are frequently said throughout the day, especially for those in sickness and trouble, when also the aid of the Mother of God or of the Saints is invoked. When one sees someone working, one says, "May God help you" (how very far from the now ironic exclamation "God help you!"). One thanks God with "Praise be to God," or in the shortened version "Praise be!" for anything that turns out well either for oneself or for someone else, and when something turns out badly one expresses thanks all the same, since, being All-Good, God teaches us through everything that He permits to happen to us. One asks a blessing on the food before eating, and gives thanks afterwards. One begs Angels to accompany a person travelling maybe only a short distance. When one hears of someone recently departed this life, one says, "Eternal Memory," or "God rest his soul," making the sign of the Cross. Such brief prayers are frequently heard, so God is not far from one's thoughts. Many people say the Jesus Prayer silently, with or without a prayer-rope, as do the monastics. It is customary for some to start each day with a sip of holy water and a piece of *antidoron* (blessed bread distributed at the end of the Liturgy). Children are blessed with the sign of the Cross before they set off for school. Everyone begs a blessing when they meet a priest and again when they take leave of him, and he is invited to their homes for a short service of blessing on certain days, as well as to the cemetery for a service for the reposed on special occasions. He will also serve a *moleben*, that is a short service of prayer and supplication when someone is faced with a difficult task, a long journey, or has some serious trouble or illness, and again in times of thanksgiving.

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Trinity. There are even folk expressions—one occasionally hears a host pressing a guest to take another cake or chocolate, saying "Three for the Trinity!" People remember the namedays of their family and friends, i.e. the day on which the saint they are named after is commemorated, by sending gifts and cards; and if possible people try to take Communion on or near their namedays. Many Orthodox read a chapter of the Gospel every day, or the readings that are appointed each day for church, and together with this they read the lives of the saints commemorated. "The Prologue from Ochrid" is an excellent book for this. [*The complete Menology of St Dmitri of Rostov is now being translated and published—two of the twelve volumes are already available—ed.*].

For country folk the farming cycle is closely connected with the Church Year, indicating when to sow certain crops, etc. There are various blessings of crops and produce, of cattle and the like, so that everything is related to God. Even townfolk keep up such traditions as eating homemade pastry birds on the feast of the Forty Holy Martyrs (9th / 22nd March), taking care that only the most essential work is done on St Elias' day, blessing the house with holy water on the first day of every month, and censuring each day with a home-censer and incense. Whenever possible, Orthodox people try to attend church not only on Sundays, but for the main feasts, even keeping children off school for this.

Pilgrimages are very popular, especially to Jerusalem or Mount Athos, or to holy sites where there are relics of the saints or miraculous icons. Many people like to visit monasteries, often for a lengthy stay, in order to join in the services and pray. If a parish can organize it, children are taught the Faith and Orthodox practice in Saturday or Sunday schools, and Summer Camps are arranged to give them a holiday which includes religious instruction.

One cannot travel very far into Orthodox territory without encountering good works. An immense emphasis is placed upon them by the Fathers. Of course, we do not have any teaching that one is saved by good works, especially if they are understood in the sense of simply fulfilling religious obligations which will bring us brownie points which in turn will tot up to salvation for us—such a concept is alien to the Orthodox heart and mind, which knows that we are saved by grace alone. But good works, understood as an expression of our love for our neighbour, are always and vigorously encouraged. One of the desert fathers was asked by a monk what he should do if, when saying his prayers, guests came, and he was told that he should break off his prayer-rule and offer them hospitality—love being a greater virtue than the practice of prayer. Hospitality is enjoined, kindness, almsgiving, and all those things whereby we strive to fulfil the commandment of Christ to love our neighbour as ourselves, but for the Orthodox all this is seen also as offering worship to our true God, in whose image our neighbour was created. It is not separated from the first commandment or our attendance upon God, and it is certainly not seen in contradistinction to it.

It is an Orthodox belief that words have power, both blessings and curses have an effect on people and things. Christ blessed the children, and He blessed bread before giving it as food for the multitude. He cursed the fig tree, forbidding us to curse another human being, knowing its evil effect. Matter is changed in a way which we cannot understand when it has been blessed—holy water and holy oil can help to give both spiritual and physical healing, since they have been blessed. So blessings are frequently requested for oneself and occasionally for one's surroundings. A building is sanctified after being blessed with holy water; the place where the Liturgy has been celebrated even more so, which is why people make the sign of the Cross and bow on entering and leaving the church. An icon would be just wood and paint without a special blessing on the materials, the icon painter, and on the finished work. Then people venerate the image depicted on it, with prayer to whomever it represents. Even objects that have been in the sanctuary are treated with special reverence. The bread that is blessed and distributed after the Liturgy, being holy, may only be eaten fasting, and any crumbs which accidentally fall to the ground are picked up and consumed lest something holy be trampled on. One's whole body and soul are sanctified by taking Communion, so the body of the deceased is revered. A saint's body is especially venerated because of his holiness and since God often grants His beloved ones partial, or even total, incorruption.

Why do people cross themselves so frequently? One is well aware of the tremendous power of our great enemy, the devil, who attacks unceasingly. Christ left us an invincible weapon against him: the Cross. So the sign of the Cross is made against danger, against fear of some kind of trouble, as a protection against the devil's wiles, and when begging God for His help, His mercy, His forgiveness, His granting of a petition. God is ever present, ready to assist in our daily struggle whenever we ask.

The Orthodox believer does not pray only for himself. He feels himself to be one of a family, the family of God, where neither race, colour, or position in life play any part. As St Paul says, "By one spirit are we all baptized into one body," and "We, being many, are one body, for we are all partakers of the one bread." So it is normal to pray for someone, even personally unknown, if that person is suffering or in need.

In what other ways do external signs indicate the Orthodox attitude to life? Humility, the acquisition of which

or of repentance, which explains why it is so frequently made during Great Lent. A prostration should be made to someone one has offended when asking forgiveness. A bow is also made out of respect for someone in authority, when asking a blessing, and naturally when venerating an icon or relic. In the latter case, it is made three times, indicating the worship of the Most Holy Trinity, Whose power and glory filled the saints. Since the surest way to become humble is through obedience, the Church expects obedience from both clergy and laity, whether it be in important matters such as canon law or the keeping of the fasts, down to such traditions as modest and appropriate attire in church for both men and women.

The message of St John the Baptist was one of repentance in preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven. The first words of Christ were exactly the same: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at Hand." So the faithful are repeatedly exhorted to repent that they might be found worthy of a place in the Kingdom. This is particularly shown in the extra striving required in the four fasting periods, and especially during Great Lent. Somebody once said, "A Christian is one who repents." But what a joy even in this world 'For those who struggle in fasting, prayer and repentance—there is no joy on earth that can be compared to the joy of Pascha. Every Sunday is a festal day commemorating the Resurrection, which is why there are no full prostrations then, why we stand in church, and why Orthodox often wish each other a happy feast on a Sunday.

Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit to His Church after His Ascension, to teach all things, the Comforter, the Giver of Life. Many services start with the invocation of the Holy Spirit to "come and dwell in us," granting us His wonderful gifts: "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." St Seraphim of Sarov once said, "Acquire the Holy Spirit and thousands will be saved." He himself was an outstanding example of a man filled with the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox struggle along the same path, failing repeatedly and repenting. In this struggle, the Mother of God is a great aid and she is greatly venerated and deeply loved. No service is complete without prayers to her, a human being like us who through her immense love for God and deep spirituality was able to bear the fire of the Godhead within her own body without being burned, for "God is a consuming fire." No wonder her unflinching aid is constantly sought. How many miracles have been accomplished even to this day through the prayers of the Mother of God and the saints! The Orthodox do not feel they are alone in their struggles, for as the Scriptures say, "God is with us!"

These brief notes on Orthodox practice are an attempt to indicate very broadly something of what is felt in the heart and how it is expressed in our services and our lives. A much surer way to understand is to read the homilies of the Fathers of the Church and of the saints, translations of many of which into English are now readily available. To one who seeks, God Himself has promised the enlightenment we all need.

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