

From Time to Eternity, the Internal Mission of Our Church

by Archimandrite Justin Popovich [1894 –1979]

It is difficult, very difficult, for infinite and eternal life to enter the narrow human soul and the even narrower human body. The imprisoned inhabitants of earth stand with suspicion before everything that is beyond here. Imprisoned in time and place, they cannot bear — whether on account of atavism or inertia — anything beyond time, anything beyond space to enter into them, anything eternal. They regard such an invasion as an attack, and they respond with war. Furthermore, given the fact that the "rust" of time corrupts man, he does not like the intervention of eternity in his life and he adapts to it with difficulty. He often regards this intervention as an act of violence, an unforgivable audacity. At times he becomes a harsh rebel against eternity, because he sees that in the face of it he is insignificant, while at other times he lashes out against it in vehement hatred because he views it through a very human, very earthly, inner-worldly prism. Submerged with the body in matter, tied by the force of weight in time and space, his spirit withdrawn from eternity, the worldly man abhors the difficult excursions towards the beyond and the eternal. The chasm between time and eternity is for him unbridgeable, because he lacks the necessary ability and strength to step over it. Besieged from all sides by death, man mocks those who tell him: "Man is immortal and eternal." Immortal as regards what? His mortal body? Eternal as regards what? His feeble spirit?

For man to be immortal, he must feel himself immortal in the center of his self-awareness. To be eternal, he must recognize himself as eternal in the center of his self-consciousness. Without this, both immortality and eternity are for him conditions imposed from outside. And if man once had this sense of immortality and the recognition of eternity, this occurred so long ago, that already it has atrophied under the weight of death. And truly, it has atrophied: this is what the whole mysterious structure of human existence tells us. Our whole problem lies in how to rekindle that quenched feeling, how to resurrect that atrophied recognition. People cannot do it, neither can the transcendent gods of philosophy. Only God can do this, He Who incarnated His immortal Self in the human self-awareness and His eternal Self in human self-consciousness. Christ did precisely this when He became incarnate and became God-Man. Only in Christ, and in Christ alone, did man feel himself immortal and recognize himself as eternal. Through His Person, the God-man Christ bridged the chasm between time and eternity and reinstated the relations between them. For this reason only that person truly feels himself immortal and truly knows himself to be eternal who organically unites himself with the God-man Christ, with His Body, the Church. Hence, for man and humanity, Christ became the unique crossing and passage from time to eternity. For this reason, in the Church, the Orthodox Church, the God-man Christ became and remained the unique way and the unique guide from time to eternity, from the self-awareness of mortality to the self-awareness of immortality, from the self-knowledge of finitude to the self-consciousness of eternity and the unextended.

The eternal living personality of the God-man Christ is precisely the Church. The Church is always the personality, and furthermore the *theanthropic** personality, *theanthropic* spirit and body. The definition of the Church, the life of the Church, its purpose, its spirit, its program, its methods — all have

*From the Greek *theanthropos*, i.e. "Godman," both divine and human.

been given in that wondrous Person of the God-man Christ. Therefore, the mission of the Church is organically and personally to unite all its faithful with the Person of Christ; to make their self-awareness Christ-awareness and their self-knowledge (self-consciousness) Christ-knowledge (Christ-consciousness); for their life to become life in Christ and through Christ; so that not they themselves live in themselves but Christ lives in them (Gal. 2:20). The mission of the Church is to secure for her members immortality and eternity, making them partakers of the Divine nature (II Peter 1:4). The mission of the Church is furthermore to create in each member the conviction that the normal condition of the human personality is comprised of immortality and eternity and not temporality and mortality, and that man is a sojourner who through mortality and temporality journeys towards immortality and eternity.

The Church is the *theanthropic* eternity incarnated in the boundaries of time and space. It is in this world, but it is not of this world (John 18:36). It is in this world to elevate this world to the world above, from which she herself came. The Church is *ecumenical*, catholic, *theanthropic*, eternal, and for this reason it entails a blasphemy, an unforgivable blasphemy against Christ and the Holy Spirit to make the Church a national institution to narrow her to the small, finite, and temporal purposes and methods of a nation. Its purpose is supra-national, ecumenical, panhuman: to unite in Christ all people, completely, regardless of nationality or race or social stratum. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28), because Christ is all, and in all (Col. 3:11).

The methods of this panhuman — *theanthropic* union of all people in Christ have been given by the Church in her holy Mysteries and in her *theanthropic* words (*ascéses*², virtues). And truly, the Mystery of Divine Eucharist composes and defines and comprises the method of Christ and the means for uniting all people: through this Mystery man is organically united with Christ and with all faithful. Through the personal exercise of the *theanthropic* virtues ? faith, prayer, fasting, love, meekness, and utter compassion and charity ? man makes himself firm in this union, he preserves himself in this holiness, he himself lives Christ as the unity of his personality and as the essence of his unity with the other members of the holy Body of Christ, the Church.

The Church is the personality of the God-man Christ, a *theanthropic* organism, not a human organization. The Church is indivisible, just like the person of the God-man, just like the body of the God-man. Therefore, it is a fundamental mistake for the indivisible *theanthropic* organism of the Church to be divided into small ethnic organizations. In their journey through history many local Churches limited themselves to ethnicism, to ethnic purposes and methods... The Church would adapt to the people, whereas the norm is the opposite: the people should adapt to the Church. Our own Church often made this mistake. But we know that these were "tares" of our ecclesiastical life, "tares" which the Lord does not uproot, but which He leaves to grow together with the wheat until the harvest (Matt. 13:25-28). But our knowledge of this goes for nothing if it is not transformed into prayer that Christ preserve us from becoming sowers and cultivators of such tares.

It is the twelfth hour, it is time for our ecclesiastical representatives to cease being exclusively slaves of ethnicism, and to become hierarchs and priests of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The mission of the Church which is given by Christ and realized by the Holy Fathers is: for the awareness and
2 *I.e. ?scesis, i.e. the ascetical life in Christ, life of self-denial. *Ascesis* is the singular form; *ascéses* the plural.

realization to be planted and cultivated in the soul of our people that each member of the Orthodox Church is a catholic person, an eternal and *theanthropic* person, that he belongs to Christ and for this reason is a brother of all human beings, and a servant of all men and creatures. This is the purpose of the Church given by Christ. Every other purpose is not of Christ but of the antichrist. For our local Church to be the Church of Christ, the catholic Church, she must constantly realize this purpose in our people. By what means can she realize this *theanthropic* purpose? Once again, the means are none other than the *theanthropic* ones, because the *theanthropic* purpose can be realized only through *theanthropic* means, never with human means or any other whatsoever. On this point the Church differs essentially from everything human and earthly.

The *theanthropic* means are none other than the *theanthropic ascéses* ? virtues. Only the *theanthropic* virtues exist among them in an organic relation. The one springs from the other, the one completes the other.

The first among the *ascéses* - virtues is the *áscesis* of faith. Through this *áscesis* the soul of our people must pass and constantly pass: that is, this soul must be given up to Christ without reservations and compromises, must go deeply into the *theanthropic* depths, and be elevated to the *theanthropic* heights. The awareness must be created in our people that the faith of Christ is a supranational, ecumenical and catholic, trinitarian virtue, and that for one to believe in Christ means to serve Christ and only Christ, in all aspects of one's life.

The second is: the *theanthropic* virtue of prayer and fasting. This virtue must become a method of life for our Orthodox people; it must become the soul of its soul, because prayer and fasting are the almighty means given by Christ for purification from every impurity — not only of the human being, but also of society and of the people, and of humanity. Prayer and fasting are able to cleanse the soul of our people from our impurities and from our sins. (Matt. 17:19-21); Luke 9:17-29). The soul of our people must be identified with the Orthodox life of prayer. Prayer and fasting must be performed not only for individuals, not only for the people, but for everyone and for everything ("in all and for all"): for friends and enemies, those who persecute and kill us, because this is what distinguishes Christians from pagans (Matt. 5:44-45).

The third *theanthropic* virtue is the *theanthropic* virtue of love. This love has no boundaries. It does not ask who is worthy and who is not; it loves everyone: it loves friends and enemies, it loves sinners and criminals (but it does not love their sins and crimes); it blesses those who curse, and like the sun it enlightens both the wicked and the good (Matt. 5:45-46). This *theanthropic* love must be cultivated in our people, because by this catholicity Christian love is distinguished from the love of the other self-styled and relative loves: from pharisaical, humanistic, altruistic, ethnic, animal love. The love of Christ is always total love. This love is acquired through prayer, because it is a gift of Christ. And the Orthodox heart prays with intensity: O Lord of love, give me Thy love for all people and for all things!

The fourth is: the *theanthropic* virtue of meekness and humility. Only he "who is meek in heart" makes rebellious and wild hearts meek. Only he who is humble in heart humble proud and haughty souls. To "show meekness towards all people" is the obligation of every true Christian (Titus 3:2). But man becomes truly meek and humble when he makes the meek and humble Lord Jesus the heart of his heart, He who alone is truly meek and humble of heart (Matt. 11:29). The soul of the people must be made meek with the meekness of Christ. Every man must learn to pray: O most meek Lord, make my wild soul meek! The Lord humbled Himself with the greatest humility: He became incarnate, He became man. If you are

Christ's, humble yourself to the utmost, to a worm; incarnate yourself in the pain of every pained person, in the affliction of every afflicted person, in the sufferings of every tortured person, in the grief of every animal and bird. Humble yourself below everyone: be everything to everyone-through Christ and according to Christ. When you are alone, pray: O humble Lord, humble me through Thy humility!

The fifth is: the *theastropic* virtue of patience and humility. That is, to forbear evil, not to return evil for evil, to forgive with total compassion the curses, the slanders, the wounds. This is Christ's: constantly to feel crucified in the world, persecuted by the world, cursed and spat upon. The world cannot bear Christ-bearing people, just as it could not bear Christ. Martyrdom is the atmosphere in which the Christian bears fruit. We must teach this to our people. For Orthodox, martyrdom is purification. It is Christian not only to bear sufferings with joy, but also to forgive with total compassion those who cause them, to pray for them to God, just as did Christ and the Archdeacon Stephen. For this reason, pray: O long-suffering Lord, give me long-suffering, magnanimity and meekness!

The mission of our Church is: to make these *theastropic* virtues ? *ascéses* the methods of life for the people, to weave the Christ-like *theastropic* virtues into the soul and life of the people. In this lies the salvation of the soul from the world and from all soul-corrupting, homicidal, atheistic movements and worldly organizations. Against the "educated" atheism and the gentlemanly cannibalism of contemporary civilization, we must array Christ-bearing personalities, which with the meekness of a sheep will be victorious over the excited passions of the wolves, and with the innocence of doves will save the soul of the people from the cultural and political stench. We must counteract cultural asceticism — which takes place in the name of the rotted and deformed European man, in the name of atheism, of civilization, of the antichrist — with *áscesis* in the name of Christ.

For this reason the main obligation of our Church is to create Christ-bearing ascetics. The voice which must be heard in it today is: Go back to the Christ-bearing ascetics, towards the Holy Fathers! Go back to the *ascéses* and virtues of the Holy Fathers! Go back to the virtues of Saints Anthony and Athanasios, of Saints Basil and Gregory, of Saints John Chrysostom and Damascene, of Saints Sergei and Seraphim (the Russians), of Saints Savva, Prochor and Gabriel (the Serbs), and others! Because these *theastropic ascéses* ? virtues created Saint Anthony, Saint Gregory and Saint Savva. And today, only the Orthodox *ascéses* - virtues are capable of sanctifying every soul and the soul of our whole people, because the *theastropic* purpose is eternal and unalterable, and its means are also eternal and unalterable, because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and unto the ages. (Heb. 13:8). Here is the difference between the human world and the world of Christ: the human one is finite and temporal, while Christ's is unalterable and eternal. Orthodoxy, as the unique bearer and guardian of the perfect and all-radiant Person of the God-man Christ, is realized exclusively with the *theastropic*-Orthodox means, the ascetical virtues in grace, not with means lent by Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, because these are Christianities according to the version of the proud European man, and not of the humble God-man. God Himself facilitates this mission of our Church, because in our people there exists a spirit of asceticism, as Orthodoxy created it through the ages. The Orthodox soul of our people inclines towards the Holy Fathers, towards the Orthodox ascetics. The personal familiar, and parochial *áscesis* ? especially in prayer and fasting ? is characteristic of Orthodoxy. Our people, the Orthodox people, are the people of Christ because, like Christ, they summarize the Gospel in these two virtues: prayer and fasting. They are convinced that every impurity, every impure thought, every impure desire, every impure spirit, can be chased out of man only

by prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:21). In the depths of their hearts our people know Christ, they know Orthodoxy, know what it is that makes the Orthodox man Orthodox. Orthodoxy always creates ascetical rebirths: it does not recognize other rebirths.

The ascetics are the only missionaries of Orthodoxy. Asceticism is the only missionary school of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is *áscesis* and life, for this reason only with *áscesis* and life does she reach and realize her mission. Asceticism — personal and ecclesiastical — must be developed; this must be the internal mission of our Church towards our people. The parish must become an ascetical center. But this can only be done by an ascetic parish priest. Prayer and fasting, the ecclesiastical life of the parish, the liturgical life — these are the chief means by which Orthodoxy brings about rebirth in people. The parish, the parish community must be reborn, and in Christ-loving and brother-loving love humbly serve Christ and all people with meekness and humility, with sacrifice and self-denial. This service ought to be saturated and nourished by prayer and a liturgical life. This is fundamental and absolutely essential. But all of these demand as a prerequisite that our hierarchs, our priests, our monastics become ascetics, and for this: Let us beseech the Lord.

Translated from the Greek by Father Nicholas Palis