

A LETTER TO A METHODIST MINISTER

The letter re-printed below was written by Fr. Ephraim (now Bishop Ephraim of Boston) to a young man named Douglas, who was a Methodist minister. The letter was published originally in the early eighties in the Orthodox Christian Witness, and is printed again for our readers' benefit because it touches upon several subjects that are very much relevant today.

Aug. 27/Sept. 9, 1980
St. Pimen of Egypt

Dear Doug,

I pray that this letter finds you well. . . .

Yes, indeed, you are right, the Scriptures are clear that salvation comes to those who have faith in Christ and make Him preeminent in their lives. You ask: Does the word “church” necessarily have to mean a visible, organized community, or does it not rather refer to a spiritual body consisting “of all true believers”? The answer, of course, is that the Church is *both*. The Church is a visible, organized, community *and* it is also a spiritual body, consisting of believers who worship Our Saviour “in spirit and in truth”; also, it is spiritual, in the Orthodox sense, not only because it worships Our Saviour in spirit (and in *truth* — this last point, as Our Saviour pointed out to the Samaritan Woman at Jacob’s Well, is also vitally important), but also because its members who are still alive here on earth today are inseparably united with the angelic hosts and also with those from all ages past who have gone to their rest and have fallen asleep in the Lord.

Regarding the point that the Church is a visible, organized community here on earth, I recall some correspondence that one of our monks here had with his Protestant parents a few years ago. His parents are Baptist missionaries, and they became quite distressed that their son became an Orthodox Catholic Christian, and then (O horrors!) a monk, and finally — “adding insult to injury” — a priest (O alas! what self-respecting Southern Baptist can read these words and not suffer a fainting-spell!).

Well, after they recovered from the initial shocks, they sought to persuade their son of the error of his way by sending him an impressive array of books containing the interpretations of many prominent Baptist exegetes and preachers, from the current and recent centuries. In response, the priest-monk in question sat down and patiently wrote a 100 page letter to his parents. In it, he quoted from much of the material that they had sent him, and he cited also many Orthodox Catholic sources to them. Basically, however, the point that he was making came down to this: Essentially (he writes) you expect me to accept the commentaries on the Holy Scriptures which were written by men who lived in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, and to *reject* the commentaries and understanding of the Holy Scriptures and the nature of the Church as it is expressed in the writings of those men (for example, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Clement of Rome, and St. Polycarp of

Smyrna) who personally *knew* and were disciples of the Apostles themselves! That is to say, the Baptists maintain that those who knew and spoke with and were disciples of the Apostles did not correctly understand what the Apostles were talking about, whereas those who came eighteen or twenty centuries later *do*.

Well, his parents were taken aback by this reply, and they went to their seminary professors to help them formulate an answer. After some had read our priest-monk's letter, they said that they felt that his views were presumptuous — that is, they felt it was presumptuous of the Orthodox to consider themselves the legitimate successors and heirs of the early Christian Church, and they promised to make a reply to our monk's letter. That was many years ago, and we are still waiting. Fortunately, we did not hold our breath.

Of course, whether our priest-monk's letter was presumptuous or not is irrelevant and beside the point. The real question is: Is the Orthodox Catholic Church's claim true? *That* is the question to which they should have addressed themselves. So far, however, they have not, and we are still waiting.

How does all this tie in specifically with what you and I are here discussing? Well, if one reads the extant letters and writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Clement of Rome, and St. Polycarp of Smyrna, the first thing he will note is that these men were *bishops* of very *visible* and *organized* communities, which had liturgical rites and a definite set of beliefs.

Another point to consider — and I think that if you think about it carefully, I believe you will agree with me. You wrote, “There are genuine believers within the Roman system, the Orthodox system, and the Protestant system. . . These persons make up the one, true, holy, and catholic Church.” Regarding this point, I think it would be useful to bring to mind St. Paul's words to the Ephesians: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Not many Lords, not many faiths, not many baptisms. As you will recall, St. Paul elsewhere emphasizes the importance of preserving the true, apostolic doctrine (“There be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be anathema” Galatians 1:7-8). St. John the Evangelist and Apostle of love does the same in his Second Epistle: “Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither greet him: for he that greeteth him is partaker of his evil deeds” (II John 10-11). And St. Paul tells Timothy, “A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition, reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Titus 3:10-11).

The point of all these Scriptures, of course, is not *misanthropy* but true *philanthropy* and concern for truth. There are *not* many true Christian faiths, because, as St. Paul told us above, there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

So, ultimately, what does this mean? If, as you say, the “Roman system, the Orthodox system and the Protestant system” all contain genuine believers, and these persons make up the one, true, holy and catholic Church, then there is a very, very serious flaw in this situation: Your genuine believers are all hypocrites. Or, they do not all share the one true faith that the Apostles were so concerned about. If they are genuine believers within the “Roman system,” then, by necessity they also believe that the pope is infallible and has absolute authority over the whole Church; they believe in the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, in purgatory, in the system of merits. If they do not truly believe these things within the Roman system, then by force of necessity, they are hypocrites. If they do believe them, then they do not have “one faith” with their Orthodox and Protestant “brethren” who believe that all these doctrines are heresy and error.

The Orthodox genuine believer and member (of the spiritual one, holy, true and catholic Church, which you speak of) says that the icons are legitimate and necessary, and are doctrinal statements and witnesses of the Incarnation. The Roman genuine believer and member (of the “spiritual, one, holy, true and catholic Church”) says, “Icons are O.K. by me,” but the Protestant genuine believer and member says, “Oh no they’re not. They are idols!” The Orthodox genuine believer and member of the spiritual, one, holy, true and catholic Church says, “The pope is a heretic.” The Roman genuine believer and member says, “He is infallible”; the Protestant genuine believer and member says, “He is anathema and the anti-Christ.” The Orthodox genuine believer and member says, “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father,” but the Roman and Protestant genuine believers and members gang up on him and say, “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son!*” The Protestant genuine believer and member of the spiritual, one, holy, true and catholic Church says, “Communion has only a symbolic, commemorative significance. It is not *actually* the Body and Blood of Christ.” The Roman genuine believer and member says, “Heresy!” The Orthodox genuine believer and member exclaims, “Creeping atheism!”

Where is the “one faith” of these “true believers”?

Or . . . they can all become hypocrites and not truly believe what they *say* they believe as members of their respective Roman, or Orthodox, or Protestant “system.”

As I mentioned above, Our Saviour Himself stresses the necessity of worshipping God “in spirit and in truth,” and as the ancient commentators have pointed out, “in truth,” does not mean only “sincerely,” but it means also that God must be worshipped in *the* truth, which the Apostles also were so concerned about, as the few scriptural quotes mentioned above point out.

As for the question of interpretation, private or otherwise, I think you may agree that the Orthodox Church's concept of tradition is helpful in resolving the problem. The Holy Scriptures themselves bear witness to the fact that they do not contain all that Jesus said and did ("And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" [John 21:25]). And hence, St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, "Brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether *by word*, or our epistle" (II Thess. 2:15). It is certainly true that, besides the divinely-proclaimed traditions which St. Paul speaks of, there were also other, man-made and concocted traditions. But the Church has ever rejected human traditions. Indeed, this is why it was necessary for the Apostles, and later, the Church Fathers, to come together in councils in order to reject human fabrications and pernicious dogmas that sought to enter the Church's mainstream of doctrine. In all these matters, we believe and know that the Lord and Comforter, the Holy Spirit, the Bestower of every good, has guided and continues to guide His Church, for Our Saviour promised that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail" against the Church. Ultimately, it is the Holy Tradition which determines which church writer is inspired (and the question, of course, has a more subtle aspect, because it is also necessary to know at what "level" the Church Father was speaking when he said what he said).

In closing, the only further thing that should be mentioned concerns the holy canons. In your previous letter to me you mentioned that, for the Orthodox Church, the holy canons were "the" authority, even as the pope is for the Roman Catholics, and the Holy Scriptures are for the Protestants. This, of course, is not true, and some of the previous points that came up in this letter may have clarified this. For the Orthodox Catholic Church, the authority is the living and holy Tradition (in which — in the Orthodox Church's understanding — the Holy Scriptures are *included*). As one of our priests recently pointed out, the Greek word "kanōn" — "canon", does not mean "law," it means "plumb-line" or "guide". (The Greek word for "law" is "nōmos"). The canons are expressions of the Faith and, at the same time, guides to helping us living that Faith.

From your letters, I see that you are truly and sincerely striving to lead a Christian life, and, at the same time, are trying to come to a fuller understanding of the Orthodox Church. Simultaneously, however, I do get the impression, especially from how you understood *our* understanding of the holy canons, that perhaps you look upon the Orthodox Church as being somewhat monolithic, or at least, a bit stuffy in outward forms and disciplines. That, I assure you, is *not* the case; and to prove this particular point, I beg you to read the delightful little book, *Papa Nicholas Planas* which I am enclosing for you. It speaks more eloquently about Orthodox

spirituality, life, and piety than a hundred catechism books (which invariably manage to be dry and boring).*

My dear friend Douglas, may our sweet Saviour ever enlighten you to seek His truth.

Ephraim, monk
and my guardian angel

* *Editors' Note:* Today, of course, we have many other wonderful Orthodox Christian books available — such as the Lives of the holy Elders of Optina Hermitage — that express the living, day-to-day spirituality of our beloved Orthodoxy.