



"Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." (Luke 10.16) "Take care, then, how you hear." (Luke 8.18)

In a 1976 Encyclical Letter On Spiritual Life in the Church Modern Fathers and Teachers Train Their Light on a Church in Need of Renewal

NOW MORE THAN EVER is the time for us all to immerse ourselves in the Tradition of the Church. It is the time not to escape from the trials and temptations that surround us, but to rise up to meet them fortified by the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and the fear of God given to us by our Lord in his Church. Now is not the time for spiritual adventure, speculation and experiment. Now is rather the time for a humble and sober examination of ourselves and our society in the light of Christ's teaching, the time for calm and careful analysis in the spirit of contemplation and prayer and spiritual self-control.

Our first and fundamental task is to remain faithful to what God has given us through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church. We must study the Scriptures, participate in the sacraments, follow the fathers, imitate the saints. We must strive for humility and wisdom, obedience and courage in our steadfast adherence to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. We must avoid every exaggeration and every extreme. We must resist every novelty which is presented to us as superior just because it is different. We must flee every alien spirit and close our ears to the many strange voices that call us saying of our Lord: Lo, he is here! Lo, he is there! We must be firm in our faith and stable in our judgments, steadfast in our devotion and constant in our prayer. We must stand fast in that which is given by God, without prejudice or pride, discerning the spirits and reading the signs of the times in order to determine that which is indeed proceeding from God.

PERSONAL PRAYER: FOOTING FOR CORPORATE PRAYER.

To accomplish our task of fidelity to God in the Church, our primary and essential duty is the practice of prayer. If we are not successful in our prayer we will not be successful in anything, for prayer is the root and ground of everything in the spiritual life. This is the teaching of our faith.

There is much talk about prayer today. Many books are written on the subject. There are discussions about places and methods and forms of prayer; much controversy about old ways and new ways of praying. In our spiritual lives we must resist the temptation first of all of merely thinking and talking about prayer, and not praying ourselves. We must resist the temptation of endless discussions about methods and techniques of prayer. These forms are not the substance of the matter. If we discuss these and fail in the *practice* of prayer, as taught us by the Lord and his saints and inspired in us by the Spirit of God in the life of the Church, nothing is achieved....

In the spiritual life our personal prayer should be the foundation of our corporate prayer in the liturgy of the Church. People who pray only when they go to church will be very weak in their prayer and will receive very little from the common prayer of the Church in its liturgical gatherings.

The liturgical prayer of the Church is performed according to the traditional rule of worship which we have received from God through the saints. The psalmody and hym-

Times Past versus Our Time

IN TIMES PAST the believer's world was a fundamentally Christian world, with heresy, apostasy and sin as the enemies of genuine Christian spiritual life. In times past men and women naturally considered themselves as heirs of a tradition, participants in a culture, members of a Church and nation with relatively clear principles and ideals, against which they could dissent if they wished, but to which, in the first instance, they recognized their basic belonging. Today this is no longer the case. Today there are no such fundamental identifications for many people, particularly the young, and particularly in America. Today there are a multitude of people who identify themselves simply as people of the world, free agents in a global society, unfettered consumers in a boundless marketplace of opinions and ideas and styles of life emanating from all corners of the universe. Today, in the West generally and in America in particular, the majority of people are given the possibility of picking and choosing the way of life which most pleases them and is most suited to their individual needs, desires and fancies at any given moment.

Thus, in times past when a time of spiritual decadence came upon Christian society; when there was a falling away from the truth of Christ and a deadening of the forms of spiritual life and a drying up of the fountains of grace; when there was a loss of perspective and direction due to new human developments and old human sins, there yet remained within the faltering society the seeds of renewal, recovery and restoration. Today this is not the case. Today the forms of Christian culture and tradition remain while the substance of Christian truth and life is being lost. A mighty rushing wind of a multitude of alien doctrines comes pouring in to fill the vacuum. While we bless the opportunities presented to us in our time, certain that the inscrutable providence of God who loves us has brought us to this moment, we must be aware of the immensity of the difficulties with which we are faced and arise to meet them with courage and strength. In order to do this with the help of God's grace, we must recall the fundamental principles of the Christian way of life and strive to understand the unique temptations with which we are presently confronted.

—On *Spiritual Life in the Church*

nology of liturgical prayer is the breathing of the Holy Spirit in the Church. It is the Word of God given to us for God's own glory. Every parish and every family and every person should be immersed in the liturgical prayer of the Church. The liturgical worship of the Church should be the context of our lives, the content of our spirits, the atmosphere in which we think and speak and act. As such it should be conducted simply, decently and in order, without any needless adornments and embellishments which detract from its divine purpose and power.

A PARISH'S SACRAMENTAL LIFE. Nourished by the Word and Spirit of God through the sound practice of personal and liturgical prayer, we Orthodox Christians in America must strive to revitalize the mystical, sacramental life of our churches and monasteries. To renew sacramental participation in the life of the Church we need only begin. Everything is there. Nothing needs to be added. All things are prepared. We need only receive what the Church gives us, practice what the Church teaches us. It is a very sad fact, the saddest of facts, that when [heterodox] Christians are looking to Orthodoxy for guidance in the mystical life of sacramental action in the Church, we Orthodox ourselves are so lacking in proper practice of those sacramental treasures which we possess by the grace of God and the gift of Holy Tradition.

Baptisms and chrismations, marriages and funerals, the services of healing through the anointing of the sick must once again be understood and experienced as corporate acts of worship and praise. They must be taken out of the dark corners of our private devotions and social celebrations and be placed in the center of our corporate spiritual lives. They must become once again the communal actions of the Church as the mystical body and bride of Christ; the common liturgical actions of the whole people of God; witnessed, celebrated and accomplished by all, together in one place, at one time.

■ **CONFESSION.** Confession, the sacrament of reconciliation with the Church, must be made regular and frequent. **It must become once again an abiding element in the lives of the faithful, deformalized and revitalized as the most common and normal of actions of a people continually united and reunited with each other and with God.** The "general confession," approved and regulated by the Holy Synod of bishops in 197[2], and practiced as a common act of confession and repentance by those in communion with Christ in the Church, must take its place alongside individual and private confession as a sacramental sign of reconciliation, healing and forgiveness of sins.

■ **COMMUNION.** Participation in the holy Eucharist, the sacrament of sacraments, must become normal and regular for all of the members of the Church. **It must be the rule and not the exception, that the faithful come forward at the Divine Liturgy, with fear and with love, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ for the sake of their salvation and inspiration in the faith.** It is the Lord himself who invites, for he himself has said: Take, eat, this is my body! Drink of it, all of you, this is my blood! He who does not eat of the Lord's body and drink of his blood with faith and devotion does not have eternal life abiding in him.

■ **CENTER AND FOCUS.** **The holy Eucharist is the center and focal point of the spiritual lives of Christians.** It is the inexhaustible source and unalterable goal of all that we are and all that we do as servants of God and members of Christ's Church. It is our unique and certain means of communion with God the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, with the Holy Theotokos Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints. It is our deepest and most perfect means of communion with one another and with the whole Church of God, with all mankind and the whole of creation. May the Divine Liturgy be for us always our entrance into the Kingdom of God, our participation in the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, as envisaged by the beloved apostle John in the Book of Revelation.

■ **ACTION.** Rooted in prayer and grounded in the sacramental mysteries of the Church, we are called as Orthodox Christians to go forth into the world to do the work of God and to accomplish our mission, each one of us in his or her own way as guided by the Spirit of God....

Let us realize clearly the responsibility that is ours as members of the Church. **It is our task to demonstrate in life what we confess with our lips.** The burden of proof is upon us, as Orthodox Christians, to show forth in deeds what we proclaim in our words....

Beginning with the clergy of the Church, every member of the body must be in continual struggle for growth in the Spirit of Christ. **Every man, woman and child** who lives in the Church must be making the constant effort to overcome that which is evil and to do that which is good according to the commandments of God. Every member of the Church must be perpetually striving to cooperate with God's grace that the works of God's righteousness might be present and powerful among us. The Lord Jesus Christ will come at the end of the ages to render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be fury and wrath. (*Romans 2.8*)

Our task today in America as Orthodox Christians is the only task which is given to all human beings by God: the task to become by God's grace all that God himself is by nature, following Christ, the Perfect Man, in the accomplishment of goodness and truth, in self-emptying love for the sake of all people....

—*Synod of Bishops,*

Documents of the Orthodox Church in America, 1976

YES, I WOULD BE CHRISTIAN, BUT...

AS WE CONSIDER THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN OUR TIME we are certainly aware of the fact that our contemporary society stands against the aspirations and desires inspired in us by God. Not only are the values and goals of secular life radically different from the values and goals of the Church, but the power of ungodly conditions tempts us to weakness and fear. Many of us are tempted to say: Yes, I would be Christian, but it cannot be done today in America.

Such an attitude is plainly wrong. It is born of the devil. It blasphemes God. Now is the time of salvation as much as any other. God is with us here and now as much as he ever was in any time and place. What we must do today is what lovers of God are always called to do. We must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ. Nothing in the world of flesh and spirit, of angels and men, can stop us from doing this, if only we want it. But what is true is that we will have to suffer if we follow Christ.

The sufferings of Christians are real and strong. Christ suffered. The prophets and apostles suffered. The martyrs and saints suffered. And if we will be children of God, we will suffer as well. We know this. For we wear on our breasts and place on our bodies the image of Christ crucified. But the sufferings of Christians are not morbid and sad. They are not bitter and joyless. The true Christians exclaim: We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5.3–5) Christ himself, it is written, was made perfect through suffering. (Hebrews 2.10) It cannot be different for us. But if we suffer with him, and in him, and for him for the sake of God's love of mankind, then we will certainly find true life, in peace and joy and righteousness in this world; and will reign forever with him in the kingdom of God.

—*On Spiritual Life in the Church*