

The "Integrated" Christian

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from glory to glory; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

In the past two issues of ONE, I have focused on the relationship between prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist. I have purposely avoided writing about the different rules of prayer (i.e., prayers of intercession, prayers of praise, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of repentance, prayers for healing, etc.) for two reasons. First, such discussions without a eucharistic foundation seem somewhat contrived and tend to dissect prayer to the extent that we can easily lose sight of its divine/human dimension. Frequently prayer is perceived solely as a human endeavor without divine participation. Secondly, these types of discussions can assign the celebration of the Eucharist to a place in the life of the Orthodox Christian where it stands as just another type or "recipe" of prayer. So long as these discussions continue they indicate that the centrality of the Eucharistic celebration and the meaning of the Eucharistic prayer remain obscure and need rediscovering in spite of the fact that more people in our parishes are regularly receiving Holy Communion.

It must be made very clear that when I speak of the Eucharistic celebration as providing the form and purpose of corporate and personal prayer I do not mean that it replaces other types of prayer or that one cannot pray without first experiencing Eucharistic prayer. What I am stressing is that all prayer culminates in the Eucharist which means that all prayer needs to have a eucharistic dimension. What this Eucharistic dimension entails and what underlies our gathering and offering of thanks to God at this celebration is our calling upon the Holy Spirit to come upon us so that the body of believers may be transformed into the Body of Christ. In the context of this Pentecostal event all of life is called to become prayer.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul refers to the Christian as the temple of the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). This rhetorical question of St. Paul can be used to describe the gathering of Christians at the Eucharist. Corporately and personally we are God's temple and from this temple the divine/human activity is manifested. Corporately and personally it is the Holy Spirit who through Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist transforms a transgressing and evil people into the temple of Christ's body. It is this Spirit-filled temple not made by hands that extends and continues the evangelical and missionary work of Jesus Christ in time and space. By the Holy Spirit every person and every community is consecrated to that royal priesthood and called to work with the one High Priest, Jesus Christ, who offers everyone and everything back to the Father.

Unless the Holy Spirit fills our prayer, our words and actions and also our silence remain empty and even alien. This emptiness and alienation in prayer is due mainly, if not solely, to our inability to pray as integrated persons. In or apart from communal worship the words and actions we use to form our prayer are not always expressions filled with meaning and integrity. What we say and do in prayer are often disconnected from our lives. We use words, we fast, we assume various bodily postures but our prayer remains tedious and empty. We know too well that once tedium overtakes us, prayer ceases to be a divine/human activity permeating all aspects of life and becomes something we would rather avoid or force ourselves to get through.

More than we would like to admit, our words and actions are devoid of thought. Yet even when we are aware of what we are saying and doing, our hearts (i.e., our very lives) are far removed from the reality we are able to grasp intellectually. For this reason the masters of spirituality, beginning with the Lord Himself, have stressed over the centuries the need for ascetical effort to help integrate mind, heart, soul and body so that prayer whether read, sung, memorized or extemporaneous has its origin and sustenance from the Holy Spirit. St. Theophan the Recluse (+1894) refers to this type of integration as "inner" or "spiritual" prayer and describes it as "the soul within the words of prayer...whether the prayer is at home or in Church." He continues to say that "if the inner prayer is absent, then the words have only the appearance and not the reality of prayer."

When the Holy Spirit lives within us, then life itself becomes prayer and prayer becomes an expression of life. In other terms, once the Holy Spirit is able to integrate the mind, soul, heart and body then what is said, done, understood and felt in prayer becomes an expression of both divine and human activity.

If we are open to calling upon and receiving the Holy Spirit and with repentance and ascetic effort allow the Spirit to live and act within us, we will find ourselves at the Eucharistic celebration. There, at that banquet, we are continuously given the blessing by virtue of our Baptism and Chrismation to call the Holy Spirit upon ourselves and the gifts of bread and wine on the altar so that indeed we are changed from glory to glory into the likeness of the Lord.