

Worship and the Church: The Foundation of Christian

Life

I

Living in a pluralistic culture poses many challenges for the Orthodox Christian. Not the least of these challenges is the need to know and live the Christian life. Like the Christians of the first three centuries we Orthodox living in America are faced with seemingly endless paths and opinions that demand a response formed by our relationship to the Church and therefore our relationship to Christ.

It is the Church's relationship to Christ, honed and nurtured by mutual love lived out in prayer, asceticism, study and sacramental life that provides the foundation upon which it can stand as a witness to the transfiguring truth of the Gospel. Tragically, however, and in spite of what some sociologists refer to as an *informed* Christian population, many Christians in America - including the Orthodox - are [in]formed by a message that often conforms to a particular ideology or ethic not necessarily in harmony with the living **Word of God**. By subordinating the **Word of God** to words of ideologues and pundits, there emerges a new alliance between Church and State or perhaps more precisely between the cross and worldly power.

II

While the concept of separation of Church and State offers the Orthodox Church opportunities it did not have with the emperors, sultans and dictators, the growing tendency to ally the Church with the political parties clouds the understanding of who a Christian *is* and *what* the mission of the Church to the world entails.

If the Church is to *be* Christ and to *reveal* Christ in and for the life of the world then Orthodox Christians must be opened to the Holy Spirit who enlivens, sanctifies and edifies. Unless the Church is comprised of those committed to **knowing** and **living** the faith, the Spirit of God has no place to dwell, the work of Christ is restrained and Christianity is reduced to a gathering of those living beneath the shadow of the law rather than those living and growing by grace and faith as they contend in the fray of the ascetical arena.

III

As the body of Christ, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church cannot be reduced to a bureaucratic institution comprised of clergy and laity. The Church is a divine and human reality that offers humanity and all of creation new and eternal life. "One can say that the Church is the recapitulation of all [Christ's] work. Christianity is the Church. It is not only a true doctrine, a rule of life, but the **new life in Christ**, the totality of new existence, the reunion of man with God, the true and intimate communion with him by grace and truth." (Father Georges Florovsky)

But to experience this reality the Orthodox Christian is compelled to join in the corporate worship of the Church culminating in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is not unusual for Christians to think that following Christ is a private affair. American **individualism** certainly supports this understanding. Yet, Christianity is an ecclesial and therefore a communal reality. **Unus Christianus - nullus Christianus, one Christian - no Christian.**

Incorporating all the elements of creation the Church manifests the new life made possible **in Christ**. It is the liturgical worship of the Church that **forms** the mind and heart of the Christian. Before the scriptures there was the worshipping community. Scripture, doctrine, iconography and the writings of holy men and women are not only **related to** but **derive and develop** from within liturgical worship.

The new life in Christ is offered to the world through the worshipping community. But if there is no commitment or only minimal commitment on the part of Orthodox Christians to worship communally how will the work of Christ continue? How will **new life** be proclaimed, revealed and shared? Indeed, how will Christians be able to live in the world if they do not pray together?

The liturgical worship of the Church provides the foundation upon which a Christian ethos emerges - an ethos of the **Kingdom** which does not turn away from the world but gleans from it all that will enhance and clarify the Church's **word and mission**.

Father Robert M. Arida