

Ecclesial Existence, Divine Compassion And Human Healing In The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov

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I. Introduction

For some of you, the title of this presentation may seem more than a bit off topic. Nevertheless, I have chosen to share with you three short stories by Anton Chekhov for two reasons. First, many of the stories of Chekhov reveal divine compassion in the unfolding of the delicate, complex and intimate relationships of persons. Second, given the stories I will be sharing, virtually every character within every relationship expresses its unique mode of existence – to borrow a phrase many will readily associate with Saint Maximus The Confessor (τρόπος ύπάρξεως) - that explicitly or implicitly draws attention to the Church's own mode of existence. With care and sensitivity Chekhov unveils aspects of the lives of men, women and the Church that make his stories relevant to the topic of divine compassion and the healing of the person.

II. Chekhov's Characters And The Orthodox Church

Through Chekhov's characters the reader encounters a writer who neither rejects the Scriptures nor turns from the teachings of the Orthodox Church. His stories often show more than a casual or superficial interest in the liturgical calendar through which the Church and its ethos impacts the lives and relationships of the characters. The feasts of the Incarnation and Resurrection together with the cycles of fasting and feasting as well as the quoting and paraphrasing of Scripture and hagiographies provide the context in which his characters uniquely reveal their relationships to God, neighbor and themselves. Each character being opened to eternity cannot be defined by a static anthropology. While seeking communion with the other, each character continuously develops in as much as there is an encounter with truth and falsehood, goodness and evil, light and darkness, life and death. These encounters show the unpredictable nature of life and the human condition. They hone the tone and vision of the stories. Hence for Chekhov reality cannot be seen as either black or white. His personal suffering and his ever increasing insights into the nature of the person take him beyond the myopia of a Christianity based on ethics which compromise and ultimately exhaust the mystery of the one created in the image and likeness of God. In the stories by Chekhov, divine compassion and the healing of *Adam and Eve* defy logic and often are counterintuitive.

The question of Chekhov's Christianity and his relationship to the Orthodox Church continues to be debated. Even those such as Father Alexander Schmemmann, who lauded Chekhov's deep insights into the mystery of the person brought about by his religious and medical backgrounds, could not confidently state that he was an

Orthodox Christian.¹ However, there are those who, like myself, see Chekhov as a struggling Orthodox Christian. Chekhov's personal quest for the meaning of human existence, his wrestling with Christ, the Church and the Gospel as seen in his characters – both clergy and lay – are, I believe, poignant witnesses to divine compassion and the healing of the person.

The quest for the truth often led Chekhov to those existential crossroads where he skillfully describes to his audience slices of life which offer glimpses into the pain, trials, doubts and joys related to life. Like a jazz or blues musician Chekhov offers spontaneous, dissonant, crisp and open-ended compositions that often develop around a character or set of characters seeking to cast off the burdens of personal loneliness, alienation and sin.

Recognizing the unpredictable nature of life, Chekhov does not allow himself to be type cast nor does he insert a pre-conceived moral agenda into his stories. The inexhaustible mystery of the person leaves the reader with the often difficult task of rendering a verdict relative to the spiritual and ethical fiber of his characters. This approach, I believe, is useful to the theme of this conference. By not subjecting his characters to a specific moral agenda, Chekhov frees divine compassion from being limited or annulled. Chekhov relates his open ended hermeneutic in a letter to the poet Alexei Pleschcheyev (4 October 1888); “ I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines and who insist on seeing me as necessarily either a liberal or conservative. I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not an evolutionist, nor a monk, nor indifferent to the world. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more, and I regret that God has not given me the power to be one. ... Pharisaism, stupidity, and tyranny reign not in shopkeepers' houses and in lock-ups alone; I see them in science, in literature, in the younger generation... I regard trademarks and labels as a kind of prejudice.”²

To speak about divine compassion and the healing of the person requires personal and communal introspection of ecclesial life. Given its historical and therefore human imperfections, the Church nevertheless remains the ark of divine compassion and healing. The inner tension of holiness and sin – λόγος φύσεως/τρόπος υπάρξεως – is a constant within the life of the Church. The stories I wish to share with you expose this tension from communal, personal and interpersonal perspectives and, given the theme of this conference, compel us to ensure that the Church here and now remains the locus of divine compassion and healing. As Father Georges Florovsky succinctly states, the Church in its historical sojourn is to reflect the wholeness of the person of Jesus Christ. The Church is

¹ See Alexandre Schmemmann, *Journal (1973-1983)*, translated from the Russian By Anne Davidenkoff, Anne Kichilov and Rene Marichal, Editions Des Syrtes, Paris, 2009

² *The Portable Chekhov*, ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky, Penguin Books, 1977, p.605. See also *The Selected Letters Of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Lillian Hellman, trans. Sidonie K. Lederer, New York, 2007 edition, pp.55-56.

commissioned to reveal and implement «a Catholic regime, ... a manner of existence opposing that fatal state of dislocation and fragmentation where all of humanity was imprisoned by the original sin.»³

III. Three Stories

The three stories I wish to share with you are *The Bishop* (1902), *The Murder* (1887) and *The Student* (1894). Collectively these stories have something to say about divine compassion, human healing and the Church. The first two stories capture aspects relative to ecclesial life that impede or polarize human relationships. Men and women are separated from each other either because of a pre-existing ecclesial culture as in the case of *The Bishop* or because of an internal and personal spiritual crisis that leads to the inner fragmentation/schism of the person as in the case of *The Murder*. *The Student* draws attention to the healing power of the Gospel as it is proclaimed and revealed in the liturgy of the Church.

THE BISHOP: Written two years before his death, Chekhov poignantly describes over the course of Holy Week the gradual death of Bishop Pyotr. Woven into the story is the relationship between the bishop and his mother Marya Timofeevna. Skillfully Chekhov draws the reader into the relationship of mother and son where the reader observes how the Church's mode of existence – how a particular ecclesial culture - impedes their communion leaving little if any room for divine compassion and healing.

Being apart from one another for nine years, the reunion of mother and son begins at the Vigil for Palm Sunday;

«It was almost ten o'clock when they began to hand out the pussywillows, the lights were dim, the wicks were sooty, everything was as if in a mist. In the twilight of the church, the crowd heaved like the sea, and to Bishop Pyotr, who had been unwell for three days, it seemed that all the faces - old and young, men's and women's - were alike, that everyone who came up to get a branch had the same expression in their eyes. The doors could not be seen in the mist, the crowd kept moving, and it looked as if there was and would be no end to it. A women's choir was singing, a nun was reading the canon.

How hot it was, how stifling! How long the vigil was! Bishop Pyotr was tired. His breathing was labored, short, dry, his shoulders ached with fatigue, his legs trembled. ...[suddenly] as if in sleep or delirium, [the bishop imagined] his own mother [coming up to him in the crowd] and receiving a branch from him, stepped away, all the while gazing happily at him, with a kind, joyful smile, until she mingled with the crowd again.»⁴

³ *Le Corps Du Christ Vivant*, in La Sainte Église Universelle ; Cahiers Théologiques De L'Actualité Protestante, 1948, p. 24

⁴ *Stories*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Bantam Books, 2000, p.421

Words such as *twilight, dim, mist, imagined, sleep and delirium* help to describe an atmosphere not only in the Vigil but throughout the Church in which an authentic intercommunion of persons remained distant and unclear. The bishop is dying and his need for communion with his mother – his need to love and to be loved by her and those around him – was impeded by the oppressive atmosphere of ecclesial bureaucracy and formalism – including liturgical formalism - that created the wedge between himself and others. Driving this wedge was the unhealthy fear instilled in those Bishop Pyotr was to serve, pastor and heal.

«He could not get used to the fear which, without wishing it, he aroused in people, despite his quiet, modest nature... In his presence they all grew timid, even old archpriests, they all ‘plopped down’ at his feet, and recently a woman petitioner, the elderly wife of a village priest, had been unable to utter a single word from fear, and so had gone away with nothing. In all the time he had been [in the region], not a single person had spoken to him sincerely, simply, humanly; ***even his old mother seemed not the same, not the same at all.***»⁵

It is only on Holy Saturday, the day of Bishop Pyotr’s death that Marya Timofeevna was finally able to reach out to the bishop as her son, as someone she could kiss and call by his familiar name. «Pavlusha, my darling, my dear one! My little son... Pavlusha answer me.!»

Fear and alienation are coupled with an atmosphere that stifles the human spirit and crushes it with abject loneliness. Returning to his rooms at the monastery after the reading of the Twelve Passion Gospels, Bishop Pyotr «undressed at once and lay down, without even saying his prayers. He was unable to speak, and it seemed to him that he would now be unable to stand. As he pulled the blanket over him, he suddenly had a longing to be abroad, an unbearable longing. He thought he would give his life only not to see those pathetic cheap blinds, the low ceilings, not to breathe that oppressive monastery smell. If there had been just one person to whom he could talk, unburden his soul!»⁶

With the Matins of Holy Friday the bishop began his three day Pascha. While reading the Gospels the reader learns of his love for the liturgical services and how only in these celebrations he found himself «alive, vigorous, happy.»⁷ In this one line Chekhov leaves the reader questioning why this liturgical elan, where one seeks to encounter divine compassion, communion and healing, could not extend beyond the realm of ritual formalism.

THE MURDER: This story is framed within Great Lent. It begins with the Vigil of the Annunciation and presents another aspect of ecclesial culture where obedience to

⁵ Ibid. p. 429

⁶ Ibid. p. 433

⁷ Ibid. p. 433

liturgical τάξις accompanied by rigorous asceticism became, in their mode of existence, sources of oppression, spiritual blindness, sectarianism and ultimately murder. In typical Chekhovian fashion, it is the reader who is to draw his or her own conclusions as to the personal causes of what could be described as liturgical idolatry/liturgical pathology.

Based on his own experience, Chekhov knew all too well that the Church's liturgical tradition was not neutral i.e. it can be used for either good or evil. It can be a source and manifestation of divine compassion and healing or the source and context of divine wrath and tyranny.

As the story unfolds, two principle characters, Matvey and Yakov, come into focus. They are cousins who have a passionate attraction to the Typikon. From the outset the reader learns that Matvey shares a house with Yakov and his daughter Dashutka and Yakov's sister Aglaia. The house is divided into three sections: living quarters, a tavern and a prayer room. With precise detail Chekhov describes the house chapel; «...a strong smell of incense [filled] all the rooms and even the entry... In the prayer room...in the corner opposite the door, there stood a shrine of old fashioned ancestral ikons in gilt settings and both walls to right and to left were decorated with ikons of ancient and modern styles, in kiots and without them. On the table , which was draped to the floor, stood an ikon of the Annunciation and close by a cyprus-wood cross and the censer; wax candles were burning. Beside the table was an anology for reading [the services].⁸

Chekhov's description is quaint, yet something sinister lurks beneath the incense, icons and candles. What the reader encounters is a *para-church* whose membership consisted of Yakov, Aglaia and Dashutka. We will get to Matvey momentarily. For all intents and purposes Chekhov cleverly describes with humor (perhaps disguising anger, sadness and frustration) the *Church of Jesus Christ without Jesus Christ*. Yakov, «read, sang, burned incense and fasted, not for the sake of receiving blessings of some sort from God, but for the sake of *good order* (my emphasis). Man cannot live without religion, and religion ought to be expressed from year to year and from day to day in a certain order, so that every morning and every evening a man might turn to God with exactly those words and thoughts that were befitting that special day and hour. One must live and, therefore, also pray as is pleasing to God, and so every day one must read and sing what is pleasing to God – that is what is laid down in the rule of the Church. Thus the first chapter of John must only be read on Pascha Day, and 'It is truly meet' must not be sung from Pascha to Ascension, and so on.»⁹

Chekhov knew first hand the dark side of liturgical worship. In his correspondence he lamented not having a real childhood since he and his syblings were forced to

⁸ The Tales of Chekhov, Volume 7, translated by Constance Garnett, New York, 1985, pp.94-95

⁹ Ibid. p. 107

sing in their father's choir. He wrote, « we felt we were convicts.»¹⁰ *The Murder* discloses a spiritual pathology in which divine compassion and the healing of soul and body are excised from worship.

As for cousin Matvey, what saved him from becoming a member of Yakov's parish was a conversion experience. Like Yakov, Matvey had been obsessed with liturgical rubrics and pietism. Like Yakov, Matvey gradually created a standard of clerical behavior and liturgical practice that was never satisfied. Matvey didn't drink or smoke and lived a chaste life. He loved to fast, especially during Great Lent. But eventually he created for himself a Christianity in which he became the moral paradigm capable of properly serving the services as a layman. « I was confessing ... to the priest and suddenly this reflection occurred to me: why, this priest, I thought, is married, he eats meat and smokes tobacco – how can he confess me, and what power has he to absolve my sins if he is more sinful than I? I went to another priest, and he, as ill luck would have it, was a fat fleshy man, in a silk cassock, ... and he smelt of tobacco I went to fast and confess in the monastery, and kept fancying the monks were not living according to their rule.»¹¹ As Matvey wandered from one church or monastery to another his disappointment and agitation eventually could not be overcome. « ... in one place they read the service too fast, in another they sang the wrong prayer, in a third the sacristan stammered.»¹²

Having nowhere else to go, Matvey established his own church in a rented room where he kept the Athonite Rule and where festal Vigils would last from 10-12 hours. His liturgical strictness and precision accompanied by a particular brand of piety drew others into his small church. For some he was a saint, for others he was the model of virtue when all the while he was immersed in his own delusion until one particular Forgiveness Sunday. He went to his outspoken landlord Osip Varlamitch to ask forgiveness who in turn confronted Matvey's delusion. «I have been waiting to get at you for a long time, you rascal, ...' he said. 'You think you are a saint,' he said. 'No, you are not a saint, but a backslider from God, a heretic and an evildoer!»¹³ Regardless of Osip's motives, Matvey is confronted with the truth which in turn led him to repent and to receive «the sacrament in the regular way and became a man again.»¹⁴ Once more Matvey was reconciled to God, his neighbors and himself.

It is the gift of repentance that opened the way for Matvey to experience God's compassion and healing. Through repentance Matvey's manner of existence compelled him, though to no avail, to bring Yakov and his family back to life. From time to time he interrupted Yakov's long and orderly prayers and would let out a

¹⁰ See Jacqueline de Proyart; « *Le Christianisme d ' A. Tchekov,* » *Le Messager Orthodoxe*; no. 143, Paris, 2005, p.26

¹¹ *Tales of Chekhov*, p.98

¹² *Ibid.* p. 99

¹³ *Ibid.* p.101

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 101

loud reproach, "It's a sin, such a sin! ... Repent! Think what you are doing, brother!"¹⁵ Eventually becoming aware that his type of Christianity could no longer sustain him, Yakov nevertheless remained trapped in his **own** spirituality. His estrangement from God's compassion and healing ultimately brought Yakov to murder Matvey over an argument about having oil during Great Lent.

It is after his imprisonment that Yakov's conversion begins. Unlike Matvey, Yakov's reconciliation to God, his neighbor and himself was not sealed sacramentally. He found life in a prison cell far from all that was familiar to him. His conversion/repentance and healing was a testament to the universality of God's compassion that extended beyond formal or well-defined ecclesial parameters. "Ever since he had lived in prison together with men banished ... from all ends of the earth – and ever since he had listened to their talk and watched their sufferings, he had begun to turn again to God, and it seemed to him at last that he had learned the true faith for which all his family, from his grandmother Avdotya down, had so thirsted which they had sought so long and which they had never found."¹⁶

THE STUDENT: With repentance comes the cross. *The Student*, one of Chekhov's shortest stories, unfolds on Holy Friday. A young seminarian, Ivan Velikopolsky, stands in the garden of two widows, a mother and daughter, Vasilisa and Lukerya, around an outdoor wood fire. Ivan directs the conversation to the service of the previous night, Matins of Holy Friday and the reading of the Twelve Passion Gospels. Recounting Jesus' passion, Ivan draws attention to another passion, that of the apostle Peter. Through Ivan the widows become aware of the inner struggle – the inner schism – within the apostle Peter i.e. his love for Jesus and his denial of Jesus. Peter, who loved and followed Jesus and who pledged to join him in prison and in death is described as being exhausted by life and weighed down by discipleship. Unable to overcome his spiritual and physical fatigue Peter undergoes his own Golgotha that led to denying the one he loved most. "Peter, exhausted, suffering in sorrow and anguish ... not having had enough sleep, sensing that something terrible was about to happen on earth, followed after him ... He loved Jesus passionately ... and now from afar he saw how they beat him."¹⁷

Hearing about Peter's inner struggle, his three denials and his weeping outside of the High Priest's courtyard the widows were drawn into their own spiritual and physical fatigue, their own suffering and brokenness which in no way mitigated their love for Jesus. The agony of Peter resonated with the lives of the two widows. "... Vasilisa suddenly choked, and big, abundant tears rolled down her cheeks. She shielded her face from the fire with her sleeve, as if ashamed of her tears, and Lukerya, gazing fixedly at the student, flushed, and her expression became heavy, strained, as in someone who is trying to suppress intense pain."¹⁸ For Vasilisa in

¹⁵ Ibid. p.118

¹⁶ Ibid. p.131

¹⁷ Pevear and Volokonsky, p. 265

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 265

particular, her weeping signaled for Ivan her oneness with Peter's agony, " ... Peter was close to her and she was interested with her whole being in what had happened in Peter's soul."¹⁹

Though the focus of the story is on the relationship between Peter and the two widows, Chekhov's silent Jesus is ever present and speaking. The cross is not explicitly mentioned and yet through the intercommunion of three persons standing around an open fire Chekhov exposes its mystery – the mystery of divine compassion, healing and salvation.

Leaving Vasilisa and Lukerya, Ivan looks back to the fire "flickering in the darkness ... and thought again that if Vasilisa wept and her daughter was troubled, then obviously what he had just told them, something that had taken place nineteen centuries ago, had a relation to the present – to both women, and probably to [the] desolate village, to himself and to all people."²⁰ The agony of Peter in the past and the agony of the widows in the present did not have the final word. For in the end the cross was victorious. Continuing to reflect on the event around the open fire, Ivan "kept thinking how the truth and beauty that had guided human life there in the garden [of Gethsemane] and in the high priest's courtyard, went on unbroken to this day and evidently had always been the main thing in human life and generally on earth; and a feeling of youth, health, strength – he was only twenty two – and an inexpressibly sweet anticipation of happiness, an unknown, mysterious happiness, gradually came over him, and life seemed to him delightful, wondrous, and filled with lofty meaning."²¹

Chekhov's *The Student* shows the cross as the beginning and end of the Church's manner of existence. Unfolding in the Matins of Holy Friday, the mystery of Jesus' passion bears the broken, exhausted and dead into something new and marvelous. Chekhov points to the way of the cross as offering the Catholic regime – the fullness of life in Christ - by which dislocation and fragmentation of the person and all creation are defeated.

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¹⁹ Ibid. p. 266

²⁰ Ibid. p. 266

²¹ Ibid. p.266