

WHY ARE WE ORTHODOX?

In our day and age, we are left in a situation where we cannot separate ourselves by walls, or any other means, from unbounded religious pluralism. Man has found himself faced with such a proliferation of religious trends, each one offering its own ideals, norms of life, and views, that former generations would not envy us. A little earlier it was simpler. The main choice facing a seeker was quite clear—religion, or atheism. Now we are faced with something much more complicated, and worse. Now, before coming to Orthodoxy, one has to go through three difficult steps.

We already know the first step: does God exist, or not? If a person is already convinced that God exists, then an even more difficult problem arises. There are many religions, but which one of them is true? What should he become? Should he become a Christian, or why not a Moslem, or a Buddhist, or a hare Krishna? I do not want to name any more; there are many religions and pseudo-religions, sects, and syncretistic groups, and you know them better than I do. In a word, a person is faced with the endless question: why, why, and why? This is the nature of the first step.

After passing through this dense jungle of religions and arriving at the conviction that Christianity is true, a person finds himself faced with a no less complicated question: What can be called Christianity? After all, it has many forms. What should he be—Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant (Lutheran, Pentecostal, Baptist...)? Thus, the third step is also not so simple.

I will tell you a secret; or to be more exact (I will name it but not tell it to you because that would require another conversation), that there is also a fourth step which requires particular spiritual zeal, continual and attentive study of the Holy Scriptures and works of the holy ascetic fathers, effort and struggle with your passions and foibles. It is the most difficult step, and that is why I did not name it right away. It consists in knowing just what Orthodoxy is, and what it means to be Orthodox. This question is becoming these days more and more acute.

Here is the situation with which modern man is faced. Furthermore, the representatives of new and old religions, or heterodox confessions, generally have significantly more opportunities to spread the propaganda of their ideas through the mass media than do we Orthodox.

Now let us go through this enfilade of rooms which opens before each person who seeks the truth, and let us look at if only the most common, but principle, features, that show why a person in fact should—not just can, but truly should, for intelligent reasons, become not simply a believer in the existence of God, not just generally religious, and not simply Christian, but an Orthodox Christian.

Thus, the first step: “Religion and atheism.” At conferences, I sometimes meet people who are truly educated, scholarly, and not shallow-minded;

and I constantly run into one and the same question: Does God exist? Who is He? Or, if God exists, then why doesn't He enter the tribunal of the United Nations and announce Himself? I even hear, "Why is He needed?" What can I say to that?

There is no doubt that the main question for man, regardless of whether he recognizes it or just senses and experiences it subconsciously, is the question of the meaning of life. I am sure that every person and all people will answer it unequivocally: The meaning is, of course—life. And not only life, but a life that is conscious, filled with positive feelings of satisfaction, joy, love, etc. And how could it be otherwise? No one ever has, or ever could regard or insist that the ultimate meaning of man's life could be eternal sleep or death.

Here lies the impassible watershed between religion and atheism. Christianity confirms that this earthly life is only the beginning, condition, and means to prepare for eternity; therefore, prepare yourself, O man, for eternal life awaits you. Furthermore, Christianity offers everything necessary for a dignified entrance into eternal life. But what does atheism assert? **Believe**, O man that there is no eternity, no God, no soul. A human being is just as mortal as his body. Therefore, in the final analysis, death awaits you and all mankind. What horrors, what pessimism, what despair! The very words make one's skin crawl: "Man, eternal death awaits you!" (I am not even talking about those strange arguments proposed by the atheistic **belief** in the non-existence of God.) This assertion alone is enough to make the human soul shudder. No, save me from such a **belief**.

When a person gets lost in the forest, he searches for the way home. Then suddenly he sees someone, and asks, "Is there a way out of here?" He gets the reply, "No, and don't even look for it. Get used to it here." Will such an answer satisfy him? It is doubtful. Won't he keep searching? When he finds another person who says to him, "Yes, there is a way out, and I will show you the signs by which you can get out of here." Won't the lost person more likely believe this answer? The same thing happens in the realm of worldview searches, when a person finds himself faced with religion and atheism. While the spark of the search for truth and the meaning of life is still preserved within a person, he psychologically cannot accept the concept which asserts that he as an individual, and thus all people, are headed for eternal death. What, then, is the point of morality, the ideals of goodness, self-sacrifice, or love for others, if we die tomorrow?

A no less murderous argument for atheism is the question, "What should I do in order to be sure that there is no God? Should I become a scientist? But there are many scientists who believe in God. Should I become a philosopher? But there are just as many philosophers who believe in God." But without any answer to that question, atheism becomes no more than blind **faith**. However, the answer is obvious: there is only one way for us to be sure of the existence, or the nonexistence, of God. That is to step upon the path of religious life. There simply is no other way.

I have just noted only one side, psychologically very essential, through which I think it is already sufficient for every person with a living soul to

understand that only a worldview which accepts as its foundation the Being Whom we call God, will enable us to speak of the meaning of life.

Thus, I believe in God. We shall consider that we have passed through the first room.

Now I am going into the second room... But—my God! What do I see here? It is full of people, and each one is shouting, "Only I have the truth." Christians, Moslems, Confucians, Buddhists, Jews, and God knows who else. So there he stands, the believer in God, amongst all these believers, trying to find out who is right, who he should believe. That is quite a task...

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Step Two

CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE

Which religion is true? Probably the one that can prove its Divine origin, for we have determined that God is the truth. To do this, a religion must supply objective proof that its teaching was not adopted from somewhere else, or based upon some religious and philosophical systems. Thus, Christianity (and only it) meets this demand. If you should ever be in the position to have a discussion with representatives of other religions on this subject, you will ask, "What arguments do you have to confirm the truth of your religion?" You cannot even imagine how unanswerable this question is for them.

Christianity has a whole series of objective—I emphasize, *objective*—arguments that testify to itself as a religion having specifically God as its source. Such an assertion may seem very strong, and therefore it requires special time to elaborate upon it properly. For now, however, I will present only the following arguments.

Historical. This argument eloquently shows that under the conditions of three centuries of the cruelest persecutions against Christians by the Jews and the Roman state, Christianity could not have survived without special Divine help.

Spiritual and moral. This argument speaks of a completely new, "anti-religious" understanding of man's salvation—the first person to enter paradise was a thief.

Doctrinal. This argument analyzes all the fundamental truths of Christianity (about the God of Love, God of the Trinity, the Logos, the Incarnation, the crucified Savior, the Resurrection of Christ, salvation, the sacraments, eschatology) as opposed to the teachings of previous religions and philosophical systems. This analysis shows that all the specific Christian truths of the faith are fundamentally new in the spiritual history of mankind. Even Frederick Engels had to admit that Christianity "stood in sharp contradiction of all the religions that existed before it." But if that is true, then where did it come from? Especially if you take into consideration that neither Jesus Christ nor his apostles, mostly simple fishermen, were

not educated people and could not have adopted such lofty ideas from an external source, nor especially could they have founded such a fundamentally new religion on the strength of their own minds. Therefore, there is only one thing left to do—recognize the Divinity of Christ, and thus, the truth of His religion.

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Step Three

TELL ME WHO YOUR SAINTS ARE, AND I WILL TELL YOU WHAT YOUR CHURCH IS

In order to understand what one or another Christian Church is, it is enough, without even touching its doctrine, to look at its saints. The tree is known by its fruits, and any Church declares those people saints who embodied its ideal in their lives. A saint's canonization therefore reflects that Church's testimony not only about the Christian it is holding up as an example to follow, but it is also primarily the given Church's testimony about its own self. You can more accurately judge the authenticity, or false sanctity, of the Church itself by its saints.

Now, first of all, I will pause at the comparison between the saints of the largest Christian Churches—the [Roman] Catholic and the Orthodox Churches.

One of the major pillars of Catholic sanctity is St. Francis of Assisi (thirteenth century). His spiritual self-awareness is sufficiently clearly revealed from the following facts. One day, St. Francis prayed very long (the subject of his prayer is extraordinarily telling) "about two mercies." "The first is that I ... could ... experience all the sufferings that You, Sweetest Jesus, experienced in Your torturous passion. The second mercy ... is that ... I might feel ... that boundless love with which You, the Son of God, burned." As we see, St. Francis was not troubled by a feeling of his own sinfulness, as all saints are; clearly seen here is his open pretension to equality with Christ in His sufferings and His love! During this prayer, St. Francis "felt himself completely become Jesus," and something happened to him that had never before happened in the history of the Church: painful, bleeding wounds (stigmata) appeared on him—the marks of "Jesus' sufferings."^[i]

Here we must note that the nature of these stigmata is well known in psychiatry. Unceasing concentration of the attention on Christ's sufferings on the cross extremely arouse a person's nerves and psyche, and if practiced long enough, can evoke this phenomenon. There is nothing supernatural or miraculous here. In this "compassion" for Christ, there is not the true love about which the Lord spoke plainly: *He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me* (Jn. 14:21). To the contrary, the substitution of dreamy experiences of "compassion" for the struggle with one's own sinful passions is one of the most serious mistakes in spiritual life, which has led, and still leads, ascetics to self-conceit and pride—obvious *prelest*, often connected with outright psychological disturbance (see the "sermon" of St. Francis to the birds, the

wolf, the turtle-doves, the snakes, the flowers, etc.; his reverence before the fire, the stones, the worms). It is no wonder therefore that St. Francis claimed to redeem the sins of other people through his imitation of Christ.

Also telling is the life's goal that St. Francis set for himself: "I labored and want to labor ... because this brings honor."^[ii] Isn't this why he said openly at the end of his life, "I am not aware of any sin on my part that I have not redeemed through confession and repentance"?^[iii] All this testifies to his ignorance of his own sins, his unworthiness before God—that is, to total spiritual catastrophe.

By contrast, we cite the moment before death from the life of St. Sisoies the Great (fifth century). "Surrounded at the moment of his death by the brothers, at that minute when he was as if conversing with unseen beings, the brothers' asked him, 'Father, tell us, with whom are you conversing?' Sisoies answered, 'They are angels who have come to take me, but I am praying them to leave me for a short time, in order to repent.' At this the brothers, knowing that Sisoies was perfect in the virtues, protested, 'You have no need to repent, father.' Sisoies replied, 'Truly, I do not know if I have even begun to repent.'"^[iv] This deep knowledge of one's own imperfection is the main distinguishing characteristic of all true saints.

Here are passages from the notes of Blessed Angela (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries).^[v]

"The Holy Spirit," she writes, says to her, "My daughter, My sweetness ... I love you very much." "I was with the apostles, and they saw Me with their physical eyes, but they did not feel Me as you do." Then, Angela reveals about herself, "I see in the darkness the Holy Trinity, and it seems to me that I am standing and abiding in the center of the Trinity, which I see in the darkness." She expressed her relationship to Jesus Christ, for example, in such words: "I could bring myself entirely into Jesus Christ." Or, "From His sweetness, and from the sorrow of His departure, I shouted and wanted to die." At this, she began to beat herself so badly that the nuns had to carry her out of the church.

One of the greatest Russian religious thinkers of the twentieth century, A. F. Losev, made a biting yet true assessment of Angela's "revelations." He writes, "The seductiveness and delusion of the flesh leads to the point where the Holy Spirit appears to Blessed Angela and whispers these amorous words: 'My daughter, My sweetness, My daughter, My temple, My daughter, my delight, love Me, for I love you greatly, much more than you love Me.'" The saint is in a sweet languor, and can't contain herself from this love. Her beloved keeps appearing, enflaming her body, heart, and blood. The cross of Christ appears to her as a marriage bed... What could be more contrary to the Byzantine-Muscovite austere and chaste asceticism as these continual blasphemous statements: 'My soul was received into the uncreated light and carried up,' these passionate gazes at the Cross of Christ, at the wounds of Christ, and at different parts of His Body, this forced evoking of bloody spots on her own body, and so on, and so forth? Finally, Christ embraces Angela with His arm which was nailed to the Cross, and she, outside herself with languor, torment, and happiness, says,

"Sometimes, from this close embrace, it seems to my soul that it goes into the side of Christ. And the joy that it obtains there, and the light, cannot be retold. They are so great that sometimes I could not stand on my feet, but lay there, unable to speak... and my limbs would go numb."[\[vi\]](#)

Another outstanding feature of Catholic sanctity is Catherine of Sienna (fourteenth century), raised by Pope Paul VI to the highest rank of saint—"Doctor of the Church." I will read a few notes about her taken from the Catholic book by Antonio Sicari, *Portraits of Saints*,[\[vii\]](#) published in Russian. These citations (emphasized by me) require no comment.

Catherine was **about twenty years old**. "She felt that a decisive turnaround should happen in her life, and she continued piously praying to her Lord Jesus, repeating that **beautiful, tender formula**, which became customary to her: "**Unite with me by marriage in faith!**"

"One day Catherine had a vision: her divine Bridegroom, **embracing her, drew her to Himself**, but then took her heart out of her chest in order to give her another heart, more resembling His own."

One day, they said that she died. "She herself later said that **her heart was torn by the force of divine love**, that she had gone through death, and 'had seen the heavenly gates. But "Return, My child," said the Lord to me, "You need to return... I will bring you to the princes and rulers of the Church." "And the humble girl began to send her epistles throughout the whole world—long **letters, which she dictated with amazing speed, often three or four at a time, and for various reasons, so that the secretaries could not keep up.**"

"In Catherine's letters the repeated and insistent use of the phrase, 'I want' particularly stands out." "Some say that **in an ecstatic state, she even addressed the insistent words 'I want' to Christ.**"

From her correspondence with Pope Gregory XI, who she had convinced to return from Avignon to Rome: "**I tell you from the name of Christ ... I tell you, father, in Jesus Christ... Answer the call of the Holy Spirit** which has addressed you."

She writes to the ruler of Milan, "About the Pope, to whom she is entrusted (**even if he were the devil in the flesh**, I should not lift my head against him.')

"To the King of France she writes: 'Do God's will, and my will.'"

No less telling are the "revelations" given to the "Doctor of the Church," Teresa of Avila (sixteenth century) also made known by Pope Paul VI. Before her death, she exclaims, "O my God, **my Spouse**, finally I shall see You!" This exceedingly strange exclamation is not accidental. It is the logical result of Teresa's whole "spiritual" exercise, the essence of which is revealed in the following fact.

She was so caught up in her "revelations," that she did not see the devil's delusion even in such an outrageous vision as the one cited below. (The

Valaam elder, Schema-Abbot John, assessed her spiritual state as follows: "Instead of deification [theosis], a passionate person will become a dreamer, like the Catholic Teresa." [viii])

After his many appearances, "Christ" says to Teresa, "**From this day forward, you shall be My spouse...** From now on, I am not only your Creator and God, but **also your Spouse**" [ix] "Lord, that I either suffer with You, or die for You!" prayed Teresa and fell down, writes D. Merezhovsky, "in exhaustion from these caresses..." (I cannot cite any more.) It is no wonder, therefore, when Teresa admits, "My Beloved calls my soul with such a **penetrating whistle**, that I cannot but hear it. This call acts upon the soul so that it is exhausted from desire." It is no accident that the famous American psychologist William James assesses her mystical experience as follows: "The main idea of her religion seems to be an amatory flirtation—if one may say so without irreverence—between the devotee and the deity." [x]

Yet another illustration of sanctity in Catholicism is Therese of Lisieux ("The Little Flower," or "Of the Child Jesus"), who, in 1997, the centennial of her repose, was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by the "infallible" decision of Pope John Paul II. Here are several quotes from the spiritual biography of Therese, who only lived to the age of twenty-two, which eloquently witness to her spiritual state (*The Story of a Soul* [Paris, 1996]).

"During a conversation before my tonsure, I gave a report of the activities I intend to undertake in Carmel. '**I came to save souls**, and first of all, to pray for priests.'" Not having saved herself yet, she came to save others!

She seemingly writes about her unworthiness, but then adds, "I always harbor the bold hope that I will become **a great saint**.... I thought that I was born for glory, and sought a path to its accomplishment. And the Lord God ... revealed to me that my glory would not be visible to the mortal gaze, and the essence of it consisted in the fact that **I would become a great saint!**" (See St. Macarius the Great, who was called by his co-ascetics "an earthly god," who only prayed, "God cleanse me a sinner, for I have never done anything good in Thy sight.") Later Theresa writes something even more frank: "**In the heart of my Mother the Church I will be Love ... then I will be everything ... and through this my dream will come true!**"

This teaching of Therese's about spiritual love is telling in the extreme. "**This was the kiss of love**. I felt beloved and said, 'I love You and entrust myself to You forever.' There was neither forgiveness, nor struggle, nor sacrifice; **already, long ago, Jesus and little, poor Theresa looked at each other and understood everything**.... This day brought not an exchange of views, but a mingling, when there are no longer two; and Theresa disappeared like a drop of water lost in the depths of the ocean." There is no need to comment on this dreamy romance of a poor girl, who the Catholic Church has—alas! called its "Doctor."

The methodical development of *imagination* is based in the experience of one of the pillars of Catholic mysticism, the founder of the order of Jesuits and great Catholic saint Ignatius of Loyola (sixteenth century).

His book *Spiritual Exercises* is a mainstay in Catholic monasteries, and insistently calls upon the Christian to **imagine** the Holy Trinity and the conversation of the Three Persons, Christ, the Mother of God, the Angels, and so on. This is all categorically forbidden by the saints of the Universal Church. They testify that when an ascetic begins to live in his fantasies, to look at himself in his own "films," and believe them, instead of fulfilling Christ's commandments and struggling with his passions, he comes to complete spiritual and emotional disturbance.

The authoritative collection of ascetical writings of the ancient Church, *The Philokalia*, decisively forbids such "spiritual exercises." Here are few quotes from that book.

St. Neilos of Sinai (fifth century) warns, "Do not desire to physically see the Angels or Powers, or Christ, that you may not lose your mind from accepting a wolf instead of a shepherd, and worshipping our adversaries, the demons."[\[xi\]](#)

St. Simeon the New Theologian (ninth century), discusses those who while praying, "imagine heavenly blessings, the ranks of angels, or habitations of the saints," stating plainly that "this is a sign of *prelest* (delusion)." "They are deluded who are on that path, who see light with their physical eyes, smell fragrances with their sense of smell, hear voices with their ears, and suchlike."[\[xii\]](#)

How right was that nobleman (St. Ignatius Brianchaninov wrote about him), who, when seeing the Catholic book *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas Kempis (fifteenth century) in his daughter's hands, tore it away from her, saying, "Stop playing romance with God." The examples cited above leave no doubt as to the reasonableness of these words. It is a great misfortune that in Catholicism, as we can see, people have ceased to differentiate between the spiritual and the emotional, sanctity and fantasy. This is the greatest calamity that can befall any Christian Church.

I ONLY BELIEVE?

In order to see the essence of Protestantism and understand where it differs fundamentally from Orthodoxy, it is sufficient to indicate its main assertion: "Man is saved by faith alone, and not by works, **for sin is not counted as sin for one who believes.**" "The sins of the believer—present, future, and past—are forgiven, because they are covered or hidden from God by the perfect righteousness of Christ." Luther himself expressed this in the following words: "Because of this faith in Christ, God does not see the sin which still nevertheless remains in us... God accounts imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness, and sin as not sin, even though it truly is sin." Luther teaches that man is a "pillar of salt," which can do nothing for its own salvation, and therefore should do nothing. As they say—no comment. You can relax. Orthodoxy, to the contrary, teaches that

man is a co-laborer with God in salvation. Christ said, *He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me* (Jn. 14:21). *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force* (Mt. 11:12). That is, in order to obtain salvation and forgiveness of our sins, we need faith with discernment and a life generally accepted as moral. But as for fulfillment of the Gospel commandments and repentance, remember what Christ said: *Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven* (Mt. 7:21).

That is, God does not save us without us, without our effort and struggle. Personal *podvig* is necessary, which makes the believer capable of receiving help from Christ. St. Symeon the New Theologian says, "Scrupulous fulfillment of Christ's commandments teaches a person about his weaknesses"; that is, it reveals to him his sins and powerlessness to uproot his own passions without God's help. But seeing oneself perishing in the torment of the passions, a person turns to Christ the Savior, and He comes to help. Then, what the person could not do by himself, he can do "together" with God. This is the beginning of a living, correct—**Orthodox**—faith.

Thus, a person ascending the three steps in search of truth, comes first to faith in the one God, then to Christianity, and finally, to Orthodoxy. But coming to Orthodoxy does not at all mean that one has already entered into it—there are infinitely more who have come to Orthodoxy than those who have ascended to the fourth step of *knowledge*.

From a lecture read at the Sretensky Theological Seminary

translated by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

[i] M.V. Lodyzhensky, *Unseen Light* (St. Petersburg, 1915) 109.

[ii] *St. Francis of Assisi. Works* (Moscow, Franciscan publishers: 1995) 20; 145.

[iii] Lodyzhensky, 129.

[iv] *Ibid.*, 133.

[v] *The revelations of Blessed Angela* (Moscow, 1918).

[vi] A. F. Losev, *Sketch of ancient symbolism and mythology* (Moscow, 1930) 1:867–868.

[vii] Antonio Siccari, *Portraits of Saints*, (Milan, 1991).

[viii] Valaam Elder Schema-Abbot John (Alexeyev), *Letters on the Spiritual Life* (Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, 2007), 268.

[ix] D. C. Merezhkovsky, *Spanish Mystics* (Brussels, 1988), 88.

[x] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 304.

[xi] St. Neilos of Sinai, "153 chapters On Prayer," chap. 115, *The Philokalia*, 5:2 (Moscow, 1884), 237.

[xii] St. Symeon the New Theologian, "On Three Kinds of Prayer," *The Philokalia* (Moscow, 1900), 463–464.