

To Love is to Remember

By Alexander Schmemmann

"To Love is to Remember" was published in 1975 as an introduction to the Orthodox Church in America's bicentennial volume *Orthodox America: 1794-1976*, celebrating the U.S. Bicentennial. It is a reflection upon the establishment and growth of Orthodox Christianity throughout all of North America that continues to provide an appropriate and challenging word for our Orthodox mission today.

To love is to remember. And to remember with love is truly to understand that which one loves and remembers, to appropriate it as God's gift. Thus with Orthodoxy in America. It was planted here only eighteen years after American independence, whose Bicentennial we are about to celebrate. Yet many are those who still affirm that the Orthodox have nothing to remember, nothing to love here except their numerous "abroads," those for whom America, from an Orthodox point of view, remains a meaningless no man's land. As if the Church here had no past, no common destiny forged by generations of faithful, who by their sacrifices and humble commitment have preserved our faith for us; as if God has not acted here, revealed His will, bestowed His gifts; as if all this did not constitute a spiritual reality which every Orthodox, whether he was born here or has come here and regardless of his background must humbly accept.

Our only true participation in this country's Bicentennial ought to be the rediscovery, in love and gratitude, of our past, the one given to us by God as our common treasure, our common path, which by determining our present reveals the way into the future. In these days of national remembrance and celebration, the questions aimed at us Orthodox is this: is our faith, which we claim to be true and universal, to remain a ceremonial and marginal accident in the texture of America, or is it, by the will of God, an essential event which is happening not only in America but also to America?

Perhaps the time has not yet come for a detailed and dispassionate study of this, our common past. Such study, however, will never be possible if we do not begin by discerning and deciphering the signs by which God has been revealing His will and His design to us. Simply to enumerate some of these signs is the purpose of this introduction.

The Sign of Mission

The first sign is contained in the initial fact which both inaugurates and determines the history of Orthodoxy in America. It is its appearance here as mission, the missionary origin and foundation of American Orthodoxy. We must never forget that long before successive waves of immigration brought to these shores sons and daughters of virtually every Orthodox nation, the Orthodox faith was implanted here by the basic imperative of that faith itself: the desire to bring the Gospel to those who, not knowing Christ, "sat in darkness and the shadow of death."

If, less than five years after his ecclesiastical canonization (in 1970), St. Herman of Alaska has generated so much love, such truly all-American veneration (already six new parishes have placed themselves under his holy patronage), if this veneration unites people of different backgrounds, is it not because the humble Alaskan elder, his life, his total and unconditional commitment to the land and the people to whom God sent him, have been spontaneously accepted by the Orthodox in America as the personal focus of their spiritual identity, of their reality under God? It was a Russian mission, we are told, sent to a Russian territory. True. But then is it not even more significant that the aim of that Russian mission was not to make Alaskans into Russians but to make Orthodoxy native, i.e., Alaskan? That it began not by teaching natives Russian, but by translating Russian liturgical books into Aleutian? What is eternally important, what makes that mission the permanent foundation and inspiration of American Orthodoxy, is that its spirit and motivation were those of Christian mission everywhere: the total identification of the

Church with the people and with their real needs, spiritual as well as material. We know that this identification, the defense by missionaries of the natives against foreign exploitation, resulted in persecutions, sufferings, in what — from a human point of view — could seem a failure and a defeat. That defeat, however, was transformed into a spiritual victory. Not only did Orthodoxy remain in Alaska when the latter ceased to be Russian, but the Alaskan Orthodox mission became the source of American Orthodoxy, its ultimate spiritual criterion. No external achievement and success, no numerical growth will ultimately have any meaning if they betray and obscure the pure light forever shining from the humble grave of St. Herman, truly the "wonderworker of all America."

The Sign of a Local Church

The mission growing into, fulfilling itself as the local Church: such is the second fundamental fact and essential sign in the history of American Orthodoxy.

When we say "local Church" we mean much more than a permanent ecclesiastical unit and administrative structure. We mean a Church with her own and unique identity distinguishing her from other Churches. For if the Orthodox Church is one and indivisible — in faith, in tradition, in hierarchical order, in sacramental communion — this unity not only does not exclude, but on the contrary, implies a diversity among Churches in the way in which each of them "incarnates" the same divine gift. The one and same Orthodoxy fulfilled itself in different ways and "incarnations" — in Africa and Syria, Egypt, Greece, Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, etc. And to deny the possibility of such incarnations — in the past, present or future — is to deny that the Church "never grows old but always rejuvenates...."

Now the unique particularity of American Orthodox — in the past, present or future — is that it became a living encounter, after centuries of mutual isolation and even alienation, of virtually all Orthodox traditions, of all treasures accumulated throughout centuries. Land of immigrants, America is therefore the land where the heritage of some can become the heritage of all, where, in other words, a living synthesis is the very form of life. Hence a permanent tension between two tendencies: that towards an acute "ethnicism," the self-defense of each immigrant group against the loss of "roots" and "identity," and that towards "openness," the desire to transcend the "ghetto" by discovering the universality of the cultural values preserved by it. It is obvious that Orthodoxy here could not escape this tension. But the significant fact of its history is that the local Church established here more than a hundred years ago was meant from the very beginning to resolve that tension, to be not the extension of a "national" or "ethnic" Orthodox identity, but the fulfillment of Orthodoxy as a common "identity" of all Orthodox.

When today, almost two hundred years after the implanting of Orthodoxy on the American continent, one hears endless debates about the future Orthodox unification in America as a remote and not too realistic ideal, to which one ritually pays lip service while in fact opposing its realization, one is amazed by the conscious or unconscious denial of a simple fact: that this unity did exist, was a reality, that the first "epiphany" of Orthodoxy here was not as a jungle of ethnic ecclesiastical colonies, serving primarily if not exclusively the interests of their various "nationalisms" and "mother churches," but precisely as a local Church meant to transcend all "natural" divisions and to share all spiritual values; that this unity was broken and then arbitrarily replaced with the unheard of principle of "jurisdictional multiplicity" which denies and transgresses every single norm of Orthodox Tradition; that the situation which exists today is thus truly a sin and a tragedy.

For this reason we should always remember that not only the ideal but also the very reality of one Orthodox Church in America is an integral part of our heritage, a Church which truly unites in herself all the treasures of Orthodoxy, presenting all of them as one treasure to the West, a Church whose proper vocation and "identity" is to transcend and to heal the sad nationalistic

fragmentation and isolationism in which the Orthodox Churches lived, alas, for many centuries. When one reads the report presented in 1906 by Tikhon, Archbishop of the Aleutian Islands and North America, to the Holy Synod of the Russian Church, a report dealing with the future of American Orthodoxy, one realizes the depth of his vision, one hears the prophecy that should guide us in our ecclesiastical efforts. One realizes that there is no other way for American Orthodoxy than to return to that prophecy and to that vision, to fulfill today that which was given from the very beginning.

The Sign of Suffering — The Cross

A common past, a common destiny is made up not only of victories and achievements but also of failures and defeats experienced together and understood in the light of God's will. Of such failures and defeats our Church has had a full share and even today she hardly can claim to have solved all problems, overcome all obstacles, reached all goals. And yet nowhere is her way under God and towards God clearer than in the successive storms that challenged and are still challenging her. It is as if with each crisis a new dimension, a new depth has been added to her life, a lesson taught and ultimately understood.

So it was at the time of the Russian Revolution when, suddenly and without any preparation, our Church was deprived of the guidance, help and support of her Mother Church and had to meet the challenge of choosing her own way of finding — in darkness and chaos, among divisions and rivalries — the permanent foundations for her life. Yet that storm, whose aftermath we still feel sometimes, strengthened her unity, inspired clergy and laity alike with a new sense of responsibility for the Church, and resulted — without any exaggeration — in a new awakening to the Orthodox understanding of the Church.

So it was with the difficult and painful adjustment to a totally new situation of the parish, with the need to reconcile within a truly Orthodox framework the respective rights and obligations of the clergy and the laity, to transform a "conflict" into "synergy" and a deeper experience of the Church as truly the People of God.

So it was with education and seminaries, publications and press and virtually every aspect of Church life. The fiery debates at our Sobors and Councils, the conflicts and clashes which at times seemed so deep as to exclude any solution, may have appeared sometimes as a sign of weakness and decay. In reality those were the signs of strength and growth. Little by little we learned how to listen to one another, how — together — to work for the Church and not for "our" particular interests in her. And now, in retrospect, one can say that if not all problems were solved, all were faced and taken seriously, not dissolved in escapist rhetoric.

Thus these conflicts and difficulties constitute the third "sign" of our past and present, the clearest announcement of our future. There is no Christian life — personal or corporate — without a Cross. If together we have gone through darkness and difficulties, if we have survived and grown, it means that the Church has truly permeated our lives, that she has become a reality for us.

There are many around us who do not share this vision, who ignore this common past, who refuse to read in it God's will. Our answer to them can come only from our life itself. The future of our Church depends on us, not just on our strength and ability, but above all on our obedience to Christ and to the wonderful heritage He has bestowed on us.

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