

Orthodoxy *ad Captandum*: “Christianity for the Guys”

By Archbishop Chrysostomos

One of the disadvantages of being in active resistance to the ills of the modernism, innovation, and ecumenism that have befallen Orthodoxy, in our days, is that we resisters are marginalized: dismissed as cranks, fanatics, and half-wits, labelled “schismatics,” and forbidden to publish our views in “mainstream” Orthodox journals. Even those in the “official” Orthodox jurisdictions who sympathize with us and support us must do so *secretly* and *cautiously*, for the most part, since Orthodox ecumenists, in their great love of religious syncretism, have little corresponding love for dissent or open debate. But there is also an advantage to being “uncanonical” for following the Canons, un-Orthodox for upholding the primacy of Orthodoxy, and “outside the Church” for opposing an ecumenism which reckons *everyone* part of the Christian Church, save us who seek it through the “strait [narrow] gate” of the Gospel. Politically incorrect as we Orthodox traditionalists are, we are free to say what others often think, but which they dare not express or even, because of their fear of seeming out of step with the current tide of Orthodoxy, actually *support*, if simply because this seems to be “the right thing to do.” “Bombastic schismatic from the lunatic fringes” that I am, to quote a characterization recently applied to me—and perhaps rightly so—by a former Evangelical received into Orthodox ecumenism through “economy,” I would like to make a few comments, from the standpoint of spiritual “exactitude,” about the “fire of Orthodoxy,” to quote a non-Orthodox voice from the Evangelical set, that is ostensibly “*sweeping across the American religious scene.*” Undoubtedly, my comments will be received as offensive and elitist by those who preach a more “open” Orthodoxy, justifying themselves by a zeal for evangelization which, while perhaps unwise and incautious, one must praise for its intentions; however, no offense is intended, and elitism can hardly be attributed to those, the “Old Calendarist” zealots, who are but the “rubbish of the religious world” and a “wretched minority,” to quote another Orthodox ecumenist—and this time one of no small stature or importance in “world Orthodoxy.”

Some years ago, now, a sect of American Evangelical Christians, formerly organized as the “Evangelical Orthodox Church” and numbering from one to two thousand individuals (statistics vary according to one’s source), were received into the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese; their former ministers were Ordained *en masse*, for the larger part, in violation of the Church’s tradition (and of her canonical guidelines—despite arguments to the contrary), and the majority of the believers were received by “economy,” that is, with Holy Chrism and not by Baptism. Since, a number of disgruntled Episcopalians have also entered into the Antiochian Archdiocese, and this influx of converts into Orthodoxy, reported widely in the American press, has taken on an aura of importance perhaps unjustified by the number of people involved. More importantly, despite the money, enthusiasm, and fervor found among these converts, the Orthodoxy which they have embraced is probably not as solid as it should be; and the fire that these undoubtedly sincere, but insufficiently-rooted Orthodox have lighted is not the conflagration that it appears to be, but something more like a flickering flame.

Let me illustrate my point by citing a recent book review by Linda Bridges, a non-Orthodox writer for the *National Review* (May 19, 1997, p. 59), in which she makes some insightful comments about a book by Frederica Mathewes-

Green, *Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (HarperSan Francisco, 1997). In her book, Mathewes-Green, a journalist, recounts the journey of her husband, a former Episcopalian Priest, into Orthodoxy, a trip on which she was at first a reluctant traveller. Initially seeing Orthodoxy as a "guy thing," she only slowly began to understand and to embrace its deeper meaning and spiritual traditions. Thus, she eventually found a joyous repentance in Orthodoxy—beyond the difficulty of its strangeness—and the benefits of a positive remembrance of one's sinfulness. In her review of the book, Ms. Bridges wonders, in response to the author's journey, "...whether the Mathewes-Greens would so quickly have come to feel at home if, instead of founding a small church composed almost entirely of recent converts, with the priest learning right along with his flock (a mixture of American do-it-yourselfery and, yes, something reminiscent of the Early Church), they had joined a big-city parish of Eastern Mediterranean ethnicity." Pointedly, Bridges also notes that, "...'grateful repentance'—constantly remembering our sinfulness, not in a puritan way but offering our weakness to God—is by no means unique to Eastern Christianity."

Indeed, when Orthodoxy is presented in an incautious way by those who have not lived and experienced the Orthodox Faith for decades and who have not examined and investigated all of its intricate mysteries (for Orthodoxy is not just *another church* or *another religion*, but an expression of an ontological and noumenal reality that is only expressed, but not captured, in our human notions of religion and even of the Church Itself), its essence is disfigured. In a positive review of this book, Father Jonah (Paffhausen), an Orthodox monk (see *Divine Ascent*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 78), makes this point clearly: he guides us away from "abstruse theological, liturgical and historical arguments." But he misses the mark, in my mind, by his simultaneous praise of Mathewes-Green for not "presenting the Orthodox Church as a mystical fortress of Absolute Truth" and for offering something more practical than a call to "spiritual perfection." It is precisely the attempt to understand Orthodoxy as way of life—as a practical undertaking—separate from the "abstract" underpinnings of its spiritual theory that makes the watered-down Orthodoxy of immature converts to the Faith so dangerous. If, in countries where Orthodoxy has existed for centuries and where Holy Tradition has permeated the very structure of daily life, one can allow practical concerns of a pastoral kind to dominate in the religious life (and one might argue, indeed, that the decline in spiritual life in traditionally Orthodox countries argues against this allowance), in a country like America, where religious pluralism and the overt and hidden effects of ecumenism and religious syncretism complicate issues, theory must firmly form practice. An "easy" Orthodoxy sells, is more effective in the short-run, and fills our places of worship. But in the long-run, I fear that we will see a turning-away from Orthodoxy—from a simple expression of a profound Faith that, in its watered-down version, offers nothing, to quote Ms. Bridges, "unique to Orthodoxy."

There is a natural harmony between theory and practice in Orthodoxy that even the noble ends of evangelization must not upset. Otherwise, as a very astute Serbian theologian recently observed about contemporary Orthodoxy, "we will create in the form of Orthodoxy a religion which lacks its true content." To the merry ring of the Church's cash register, we have seen a surge in Orthodox conversions in this country, though certainly nothing, again, like a fire. Once more, this surge is based more greatly on fantasy than on fact, and the Orthodoxy that we are creating in America has a ring of inauthenticity: "an Orthodoxy of clichés." We are told that Orthodoxy is a "well-kept secret." Is that so? I remember, as a teenager in America, being told by the cronies of those who established

the so-called Evangelical Orthodox Church—zealots from the Campus Crusade for Christ—that Orthodox Christians were without Divine Grace, having failed to “accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.” I remember when parishes of Orthodox ethnics, Mediterranean and Slavic alike, were the recipients of repeated visits from the same Evangelical Orthodox who have now found the *historical Church* in Orthodoxy, but who then called our historical primacy a “fallacy.” Orthodoxy was not hidden in the past; rather, *it was difficult*. In fact, it often tested those who came to it, like Christ with the Greek woman who approached Him on behalf of her demonized daughter and who was initially told that it was not fitting to give the bread of children to the dogs. Now that Orthodoxy has been made easy, “watered-down,” and conformed to the world of American religion—accepting a religious relativism, in the form of ecumenism, heretofore unknown to Orthodoxy—, it is *suddenly known to everyone*.

We hear now, among those who have found refuge in the ultra-modernistic Orthodoxy of the Antiochian Church, that they are attached to a Patriarchate “where Christians were first called Christians”: their “union card,” as several Priests have expressed it. But is this Orthodoxy? Do we not celebrate almost daily the Liturgy of a great Saint who died in exile from the “Chief See” of Orthodoxy? Are we Orthodox not engaged in a struggle for therapeutic restoration through the cleansing of our hearts and their illumination in struggle against all that is demonic and evil, even if such dark forces should be found in the very corridors of the Church administration itself? It seems, indeed, that many of these Evangelical converts to Orthodoxy have concerned themselves with the externals of Orthodoxy—these same people who accuse us traditionalists of a preoccupation with “bells and smells,” oddly enough—and with a desire for historical and institutional “legitimacy” that is both foreign to Orthodoxy, in which all things are validated by spiritual authority, and to their very Protestant roots. In the guise of Orthodoxy, we are seeing the creation of a neo-papism which centers on externals, and not on the difficulties of spiritual transformation, and which is appealing to the egos and coffers of the ancient Patriarchates, captured as they are, for the most part, by ecumenism and compromised as they are by political priorities and a desire for worldly recognition.

Along with this retreat into an external Orthodoxy, not a few of these converts from Protestantism have also lost, in their new religion, some of those virtues which should have made them better Orthodox Christians. In the Orthodoxy of neo-papal Patriarchalism and worldly recognition, they have brought out their cigars and cocktail glasses. Indeed, the “negotiated” union between the Antiochian Orthodox and the former “Evangelical Orthodox Church” was settled, in a published description of this event, by the smoking of cigars. Imagine how this compares to the actions of the Apostles in the Upper Room at the “birth” of the Church. Fasting has become a formal discipline, and one subject to “revised rules” (read: “creature comforts”), rather than a symbol of our restoration to Grace. Icons, which many of these converts, because of their lack of inner spiritual growth, at first found “ugly,” they now find “sweet” and inspiring, as though enlightened by the same process in which one moves from a repulsion for modern art to an appreciation of its “hidden qualities.” But where is the fervor for the primacy of Orthodoxy, and thus a disdain for ecumenism? Where is the desire to emulate our Orthodox Saints? Where is that inner yearning for an other-worldly Orthodoxy, not wrought in daily exercises and disciplines alone, but in inner silence, in obedience (with all of its risks), in profound awe before the Providence of God, in utter submission to the God-tested ways of inner transformation that call us to study and to immerse ourselves in the difficult, challenging, and com-

plex theories of spiritual growth?

Orthodoxy made easy is growing. It is not necessary to be Baptized, with all of the difficulties that this presents for a convert both in his family and among his friends. One need not take on a new name, honoring an Orthodox Saint, and thus he avoids the difficulty of such a practice (notwithstanding the fact that what Americans cannot do for the Church they easily do for marriage, at least in the case of women, changing, in this instance, their very family names). Fasting, once more, can be tailored-made, supposedly so as to avoid spiritual pride; and “love” ostensibly dictates that one not fast, and thus insult his host, when invited on Wednesday or Friday to a non-Orthodox home (notwithstanding the fact no good friend would fail to honor a guest’s diet, if it were for the purpose of losing weight or to reduce cholesterol). Thanks to the “Bobbies,” “Billies,” and “Stans” of modern Orthodoxy, we poor traditionalists are being *enlightened* by catechisms and manuals on the spiritual life. Our Saints and theologians, who conversed with Angels and even resurrected the dead, trembled before the prospect of writing about the profound mysteries of the Faith, for fear of misleading others. We monastics, living for decades under obedience and daily immersed in the Divine Mystery of the Eucharist, quake before the delusion that we could catechisms or books of spiritual instruction. Indeed, we feel our inadequacy even in translating the sacred writings passed down to us from the Fathers, knowing that we grasp only in words what they knew from *within God*. Yet, easy Orthodoxy, counting its many conversions as proof of its stability and correctness, is now teaching us about the simpler things of our Faith.

Not long ago, a former Evangelical only recently converted to Orthodoxy called our monastery to ask about services. In the course of speaking with him, a very pleasant and apparently sincere man, we asked what jurisdiction he belonged to. He answered, “Well, I am in the...well, the..uh...Eastern Rite of the Antiochian Church. My Priest is Father [a secular name, not that of a Saint]. I guess I’m new to this, but I am a member of the Church.” We warned the man that he would not be encouraged to visit us, and, indeed, his failure to appear for services confirmed this. Here, we have an example of “easy” conversion gone wild. Will such Orthodoxy survive? Will the little house fire within contemporary Orthodoxy really become anything more than it is? And will the heterodox not be able to extinguish this flame, created and fueled by a religious spirit, and expressed in religious terms, that they fully well know? Can Orthodoxy survive in a watered-down form, taught by catechisms and by theological argumentation? What of the years of struggle and testing that True Christianity demands? What of the witness of silence? What of the caution against unwisely laying claim to salvation? What of the tradition of submission to the Providence of God? What of the unknowability of God Himself? Can we approach God from within, when we have defined him from without, and this in catechisms written by those with the “guys” and their “gals” in mind? Can those who do not know the language of “tongues,” that spiritual, secret language of conversation with God, capture what our Church truly means by such things in the language of Evangelicals, for whom this phenomenon is either unknown or has been reduced to the absurdity of mental aberration and witless, emotional jabbering passed off as “prophecy”?

I cannot answer these questions, and I may be wrong in posing them. But they are questions which others must be asking, if only in silence. And if this is the case, let us all be circumspect about what is being done in the name of Christ, but which may all too soon be transformed *into the service of another*.