

The Subtle Effects and Sad Consequences of Ecumenism and Modernism on Orthodox Worship and Liturgical Piety

by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna

I CONSTANTLY EMPHASIZE to people that we are not, like some hapless religious bigots—and they unfortunately exist—, opposed to ecumenism because we believe or—God forbid—*hope* that all of those outside Orthodoxy are going to be lost and condemned; rather, we stand in opposition to anything that, drawing on the dangerous spirit of religious and confessional relativism, impugns our conviction that the Orthodox Church contains and continues the fullness of the Church which, in the words of St. Athanasios the Great, “the Lord delivered, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved.” It being our duty to pass on that which we know to be capable of transforming man and the world, we protect our Faith not solely or primarily for ourselves, but, in the Evangelical spirit of love, for our fellow men and women.

If ecumenism has rendered Orthodoxy just one among many religions and bereft of claims to the powers of spiritual and historical primacy—and dubbed us Orthodox traditionalists, according to the standards of “ecumenical love,” ignorant troglodytes—, the Orthodox ecumenists bear much of the responsibility for what this has done to the integrity of Orthodoxy and for the distortion of its witness in the contemporary ecumenical world. In this same way, each of us Orthodox today also bears no small responsibility for overlooking, much to our shame, the effects of religious syncretism (and our own laxity in practice) on Orthodox worship and liturgical piety. Here, too, we have thus compromised our witness to the world.

When Russia was converted to Orthodox Christianity, according to pious accounts, it was because Prince Vladimir’s representatives, who had gone throughout the world looking for a religion for his people, returned to the Prince and told him that they had, in the Great Church of St. Sophia, in Constantinople, experienced the beauty of a form of worship so lofty and exalted that they did not know whether they were in Heaven or on earth. Whatever the historical accuracy of this story, it captures perfectly the power of Orthodox worship and liturgical piety to effect contrition and true belief in those who avail themselves of its sacred dimensions. In our worship of God, we Orthodox bring Heaven and earth into communion; we enter into communion with God and bring the soul into intimate contact with its Creator.

How do we do this? First, we worship in an ascetic spirit: we stand while we worship, offering God our minds and bodies in prayer. We fast before Liturgy. We separate ourselves from the world, to whatever extent possible, in preparation for entering into the ethereal House of God, clad in the best of clothes, with the best of intentions, setting aside enmity with our enemies, and ready to stand spiritually clean before God through the Mystery of confession. The Church, in turn, is adorned in an other-worldly fashion, containing nothing of the daily world and reflecting—even in its iconographic style—another realm: a sacred world transformed and imbued with a new fragrance, a new language, and a new vision, as represented by the incense which we offer up to God, by the exalted poetry of the services, and by the subtle light and uplifting atmosphere of the sacred space which is the Church itself. And in this place, an eschatological New World present in some way even in this fallen domain, we come into direct communion with Christ, taking into ourselves—through the Mystery of the Eucharist, which is the central focus, aim, and purpose of our liturgical worship—His very Body and Blood and being united by Grace with Him, becoming “small Jesus Christs” within Jesus Christ and sons of God by adoption.

The power of the worship and liturgical piety of Orthodoxy, which has drawn even the most aggressive atheist to belief in God by way of a true encounter with Him in the Divine Liturgy, is one of the key Evangelical tools of the Orthodox Church. Yet, while we Orthodox anti-ecumenists may defend our Faith against the theological and ideological assaults of ecumenism and religious syncretism, we have been far too negligent—and often *sinfully and willfully so*, as I said above—in preserving the purity and integrity of this wondrous gift of our liturgical (in essence, our *Eucharistic*) traditions.

I remember my grandfather’s explanation of how the abuse of pews first entered into the Orthodox Church. He traced this generally to European influence and the desire of Orthodox to imitate what they considered the more “civilized” practices of the Latins and Protestants. However, the personal motivations behind this innovation he attributed to pride, since many Orthodox (especially in America) were insulted when non-Orthodox asked them if they were unable to afford pews; to spiritual laxity, since, after the calendar reform and the emergence of modernist ideas, lukewarm believers came to resent the ascetic aspects of worship—which were always a part of the Orthodox ethos and even Orthodox theology, as Father Georges Florovsky observes; and ecumenism, since, as Orthodox began to look at their Church as something “between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism,” rather than a thing in and of itself, they came to believe that Orthodoxy could incorporate into its worship the “comforts” of heterodoxy (as they had the “convenience” of the New Calendar) without negative effects.

My grandfather’s trenchant observations, precisely on the mark, had

prophetic dimensions. Now, eight decades after he first saw a decline in the integrity of Orthodox worship and liturgical piety in the Church, and only a little more than forty years after he spoke to me about these trends, we see a complete distortion of Orthodox worship. Even if one goes to historical Churches in Greece, while they may have Byzantine Icons of a traditional kind, they are often filled with pews (or with fancy carved chairs arranged as pews), completely spoiling the open space of the Church, which represents the worshipping world. Prostrations and similar signs of humble piety are fast disappearing, if simply because they are made impossible by these impediments. In this country, accustomed as they are to sitting at all times in Church, the faithful actually balk and protest at any attempt to encourage them to worship standing, as Orthodox tradition dictates. As a result, they sit, as though in a theatre, watching the “performance” of what they think is a “ritual” disconnected from them, separated, as they are, from participation in the *leitourgia* (literally “the work”) of the people of God.

In the past, Orthodox Churches had benches or choir stalls (*stasidia*) around the perimeter of the sacred space of the Church, so that the old and infirm could sit and where, during long services, those who were standing could rest for a few minutes, before standing again. Today, even in some so-called Old Calendar Churches (i.e., traditionalist Orthodox communities) in this country, naves and narthexes are crowded with pews or rows of ugly chairs, and all sorts of “comfortable” devices are not uncommon. Convenience and comfort have produced churches modelled on the halls and gathering places of the heterodox, if not the meeting places of secular clubs. Bright lights—rather than natural light, subtle oil lamps, and candles—distract the senses; worldly, quotidian artifacts clutter the Church; and familiar and profane adornments and even art (as though Byzantine iconography were just a style to be featured among many other kinds of artistic expression) are scattered about the place where one once encountered God in mystery.

Altar rails, Latin-style votive lights, and other non-Orthodox religious trappings of every kind can be found today in many Orthodox Churches—and, as I have observed, even in Old Calendarist Churches. The theatre has set the standard for our Churches. Chanting, rather than humbly offered as a melodious tribute to God, is frequently theatrical, dramatic, and operatic. In the few instances that the worshippers rise from their chairs, the thought of a bow or a prostration (which is, again, impossible to execute) is the last thing in the minds of any worshipper. If the believers are well-dressed, it is rarely with the thought in mind of meeting, in the Church, the Divine Master and the King of Kings; if anything, it is to impress others with one’s expensive clothes or one’s supposed taste.

The consequences of all of this are devastating. Once the faithful have lost a sense of asceticism in worship, they expect the Church to

cater to their needs. One no longer sees an old and lame worshipper apologizing—unnecessarily—for his or her inability to stand through a service; rather, even healthy believers *expect* the Church to serve their needs and look to their comfort. Such an attitude impedes communion with God, which has already become difficult in an ecclesiastical atmosphere which has lost its ability to foster contrition, silence, and mystery, and which has, once more, become more like the theatre. Moreover, it subtly creates, by way of the influence of forms of worship foreign to Orthodoxy, a disrespect for the other ascetic elements of our Faith: fasting, self-sacrifice, self-abasement, and long-suffering patience.

And what is the final outcome of this deterioration in the traditional worship and liturgical piety of the Church? Ironically enough, it leads to the very thing that—though it may be opposed in theory and word—has been allowed to impact so negatively the inner life, the worship, of the Church; that is, it leads to ecumenism itself. The subtle effects of ecumenism and a spirit of modernism on the worship and liturgical piety of the Church, eating away at the heart of the Eucharistic and ascetic traditions of the Church, ultimately affect, not just the faith of the Orthodox ecumenists, but that of the uncaredful anti-ecumenists. Thus it is that, denying to their children the unique experience of Orthodoxy, which so overwhelmed St. Vladimir's emissaries in Constantinople, and the spiritual fruit that Orthodoxy produces when cultivated in the refined soil of traditional piety, here in the West our Old Calendar Churches have fewer and fewer young people. As the youth see a faith that proclaims itself unique, yet which draws on the ethos and thinking of the ecumenists, with their "comfortable" pews and salvation without ascetic sacrifice, they reject traditional Orthodoxy as "*just another religion.*"

As well, when Orthodox traditionalism succumbs to preaching in word and not in action, it becomes ecumenical in a way that most people do not understand. Bereft of practice and an external manifestation of its beauty and power, Orthodox resistance—and *especially* when it is preached with the fanatic fervor of those unwise in spirit—loses its quality of love. If Orthodox worship draws others by its externals, it is only because these externals are formed by, and endowed and redolent with, love. For true spiritual beauty cannot be separated from the Evangelical love that streams forth from our worship, which is based upon, drawn from, and fully revealed in the love of Christ which the Sacrifice of the Eucharist truly is. When we compromise that witness, then we become, whatever our confession, and no matter how loud or bombastic our pronouncements against religious syncretism, the essence of what ecumenists are: We are one with those who preach a false love.

Our anti-ecumenical efforts, therefore, have only just begun. They must continue, as well, in the restoration of the right worship central to right belief and True Faith. †