Doru Costache

The Orthodox Spring
a diary

• With a foreword by John A. McGuckin •

AIOCS
The Australian Institute
for Orthodox Christian Studies

The Orthodox Spring
A Diary

To
the
memory
of
my
parents
Dumitra
and
Vasile
who
taught
me
the
meaning
of
freedom
responsibility
and
integrity

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A Diary

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Foreword

These sets of reflections on Orthodox ecclesial and spiritual life come at the reader like an arrow on fire. They are not Fr Doru's sermons (or if so, only in part); they are more properly addressed to the individual in the quietness of his or her room, or their place of prayer, rather than as words sent out for a large gathering. This is because they are like the fiery apophthegms of a spiritual father—often meant to shake us up; to make us think beyond our clichés; to shock us out of complacency. And yet, like the words of a true spiritual father, they come to us (even when they are 'hard sayings') with such a sense and context of love that one can recognise the deep pastoral care of a good shepherd. One may shout out agreement, or even disagreement, with any particular set of thoughts. This is called dialogue, and it is something lamentably missing from so much of modern Orthodox intellectual exchanges, which are often conditioned by such a spirit of servility and fear that it makes one wonder what happened to the age of the Fathers—those great bishops of our Orthodox tradition who were intellectually open to all that was good and instructive from the world around them. Such men made our Orthodox church, once, into the radiant mistress of wisdom for all the world's envy.

If Fr Doru shakes the Iconostasis every now and again, it is certainly not because he is an iconoclast: rather because he is a true Orthodox teacher who loves the church passionately and wants his fellow believers 'to get real'; to take Orthodoxy out of its all too frequently assumed subaltern robes and join the modern world. If he shakes the Iconostasis, it is to dust it. Like the author of the ancient *Epistle to Diognetus*, Fr Doru believes that the church is in the world, is a real part of its modernity, in fact is its very soul. Because of this, for him, all masquerades that make out the Orthodox church as rigidly authoritarian by nature, right-wing by preference, medievally obscurantist by desire, play into the disease of paralysing among us one of the most important characters and duties of 'being church': namely our mission to evangelise our modern world. Those whose view of Orthodoxy is so fearful that it cannot dare to engage with the real state of our troubled international societies, are like the Novatianists whom the Emperor St Constantine rebuked at the Council of Nicaea when he said to their purist and rigourist leader: "Climb up to heaven alone Fr Novatus."

This is not a book to read over lightly: rather a set of prophetic charges (sometimes explosive charges!) that ask of their readers to open not only their minds to what they are saying, but even their hearts to what the Holy Spirit may be saying through them. Whatever the case, Fr Doru is never going to be like lonely Novatus in his ivory tower model of the church. Here in this book he is busy being a good carpenter, like his Lord; banging together as wide a staircase as he can for as many of his flock of listeners as possible.

Archpriest Professor John A. McGuckin
Oxford University
Faculty of Theology

Preface

This little book gathers together reflections I wrote down as a diary throughout most of 2019. Many of these thoughts refer to the traditional rhythms of the Orthodox Church of Byzantine tradition. Some of them are explicitly liturgical, others not so much. Truth be told, not all of them are new. As the immediate framework of my thinking is the liturgical year, in one form or other these ideas were with me since long ago, gestating. They are now ready to hatch.

Why now? First of all, I believe that I am better equipped to give them an appropriate form than I was, say, ten years ago. Second, some of my musings address matters of importance for the wellbeing of God's people. Certain matters, indeed, such as derailments from the ecclesial mindset and ethos, require urgent action on our part. It is this sense of urgency which prompts me to make these thoughts public—regardless of how difficult it might be for the reader to digest some of them.

But why thinking liturgically? What sets my mind upon liturgical parameters is the double conviction that the church is a learning society, and that the liturgical year represents a genuine curriculum of ongoing study. Traditionally, this curriculum is called "mystagogy," an initiation into mysteries. What matters is that this curriculum challenges us to continue learning by contemplating the scriptural readings prescribed for the liturgical framework, as the year progresses. Accordingly, most of my reflections arise from the prescribed lessons. True, occasionally

what stirs my thoughts are events occurring within the church and beyond it, or my own readings. However, even these other factors feed into the same curricular experience. For a learning society, everything is an opportunity for exercising discernment and for gathering wisdom.

In a nutshell, the message I convey here is that we must not grow complacent, that we must truly become what we think we are, and that in order to achieve this goal we must revisit our understanding of the Orthodox tradition, together with our ways of adhering to it. While most of my musings are addressed to the believer as a person, others are aimed at the church. In short, I focus upon individual and ecclesial failures and inadequacies, whose solutions—I posit—originate in the liturgy. Sometimes, however, I look at things through the related lens of scriptural and patristic wisdom.

These references to our darker side are neither whimsical nor vindictive. My approach comes from my double experience as priest and spiritual guide, on the one hand, and as scholar of theology, on the other hand, for more than twenty years now—thus, from my activity as a shepherd and a Christian academic. Specifically, over the years I have become increasingly aware of the triumphalism which plagues various Orthodox milieus. Triumphalism, whether personal or ecclesial, does not befit the Gospel, and holds no share in the best of our tradition. In turn, it blinds us from our own truth, as persons and as a church, a truth we ignore because we have grown alienated from our own tradition. The word of Father Georges Florovsky comes to mind, *pseudomorphosis*, which describes our current state, both as a church and as believers.

What the reader finds in what follows are thoughts about our shared pains. Therefore, this might not be the most pleasant of readings. Taking my cue from the saints, however, even though the reader might be shocked by some of my views, I hope that whoever wishes to be edified, will be edified. "As for me, I meet people as they find me" (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetic Collection*, Abba Theodore of Pherme 28). There are several patches of light here and there though, illustrat-

ing the advantage of having a tradition that can still guide us out of the labyrinth of proud ignorance.

I conclude these prefatory thoughts by gratefully acknowledging the generous support I received for the production of this little book. My lifelong friend, Ion Nedelcu, graciously performed, once again, the miracle of shaping my jottings into something closer to his artist's soul. A number of people, known and unknown, donated sufficient money for this work to see the light of day. Others prayed for me and spread the good word. I wish them well.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge here—from the depths of my thankful heart—the moving encouragement I received from Father John, who kindly wrote the 'Foreword' to this volume. His profound contributions to scholarship and the church both humble and inspire me.

Finally, I ask the reader for lenience and patience. Nothing that he or she will read below is meant to subvert what is good—I only mean to subvert what is bad. Such is the spirit of the Orthodox spring.

The author

Mapping the Ecclesial Minefield

If there ever was one Orthodoxy, one way, no longer. There are many Orthodoxies, many ways. They all have the right to be, and their diversity enriches all. But there is no such thing as one Orthodoxy today, and we should stop pretending that there is. And no version is better than the others. All complement all. This is our truth.

*

There is no Orthodox way, at least not only one way. There are many Orthodoxies, and thus many Orthodox ways. He who is the Way, Christ, has secured many rooms in his Father's house. Many rooms. Why not one big room? The answer is simple: because to be together in one room requires for all to think and to live identically, and no one does. Not contemporary Orthodox anyway. Many rooms, many ways. There are many Orthodoxies, many Orthodox ways, each one leading to a room in the Father's house. The current reductionist utopia of the Orthodox way—of one Orthodoxy—is deceiving. This is what keeps eluding the Orthodox themselves as well as the outsiders.

*

In the absence of a realistic assessment of Orthodoxy as many ways, or many rooms, contemporary Orthodox have become utopian, radical, and fundamentalist. No wonder that the equally utopian, radical,

and fundamentalist outsiders who seek to join them expect to find in Orthodoxy a monolithic, oneway, staunch, rigid, unloving religion. But the best is yet to come.

*

By and large, there are two kinds of culture. Some are law cultures, focusing upon commandments, rules, and boundaries. Others are wisdom cultures, searching the truth, making sense of things, being interested in hermeneutics, and drawing lessons for life. There are, of course, various shades of grey within and between these groups. For example, the Old Testament—usually taken to be a law culture—interprets the commandments through prophetic and wisdom lenses, to the extent that its law becomes teaching. Thus, the Old Testament is a wisdom culture. A typical law culture is what most people call "the West." Drawing water from the wells of Roman legalism, the West finds its most basic expression in aphorisms such as "wear your seatbelt; it's the law." I do not mean to reduce the West's subtle nuances to this sentence, but this is how things look at least on the outside. At least to one like me, a newcomer. While the sentence "wear your seatbelt; it's the law" sums up the spirit of law cultures, the bearers of a wisdom culture will find this pronouncement completely unsatisfactory. A wisdom culture has to assimilate this kind of commandment by way of hermeneutical filtering. Here is how that can be done. One must wear the seatbelt not because it's the law; it is because wearing the seatbelt might save one's life. The law itself is in place for the same reason, namely, to preserve life, not to work instead of life or against it. Legalistic dictates will never make sense to the bearers of a wisdom culture. But let's see what happens when the two types of culture meet, say, when representatives of a wisdom culture live in a law culture. Case in point, Orthodox communities in Anglo-Saxon settings. I shall assume that the Orthodox continue to represent a wisdom culture, while the Anglo-Saxon contexts illustrate a law culture. Because of the incongruity of the two worlds, in most instances the Orthodox tend to isolate themselves from their context. It happened, it happens, it will

keep happening. In other instances, the Orthodox adopt the principles of law culture. This changes their ethos dramatically, a process which is well underway in many parts. Take, for example, the rendition into English of scriptural and liturgical texts that accommodate legalistic language. In the "Our Father," English-speaking Orthodox keep saying "forgive us our trespasses," when "trespasses" is both a bad translation of *opheilemata* (debts, what is due, what is owed) and a legalistic alteration of their ethos. Transgressions happen in regards to a law, not the Father's love for us. What does this mean in terms of the Orthodox mindset? We stop seeing God as love; instead, we imagine a celestial punisher. Also, English-speaking Orthodox keep referring to Christ's "authority." But the scriptural word *exousia* refers to the power one exercises by virtue of one's being, not by virtue of a law. Christ, through this translation, is not powerful and almighty; instead, he is given power to act in the limits of a law. Thus, the Son of Man is no longer Lord of the sabbath. In the same vein, the Orthodox Churches active in Anglo-Saxon contexts are "jurisdictions," exercising an "authority" whose legal status must be upheld to the letter. That the word "jurisdiction" comes from Latin, being charged with the Roman legalistic spirit, is telling. The examples can continue for ever. But these linguistic clichés and the fact that we believe what we say when we use them are not the worst that may happen. The worst is when English-speaking Orthodox stop seeking wisdom and feel "offended" by it—when they are no longer interested in the truth of their existence. And they "take offence" every time someone tells them the truth. "Offence," of course, is another legalistic word, betraying a legalistic cast of mind; a word that makes no sense outside a law culture. As a result, being "offended" by the preaching of their prophets, English-speaking Orthodox do not draw wisdom in humility and patience; they complain and file lawsuits. Which is a legalistic thing to do. At the end of all this, out of two cultures, one. *Aferim*!

*

Let's change the lens. There are two kinds of culture, heraclitean and parmenidean. Parmenidean cultures mirror Parmenides' static world.

Heraclitean cultures resemble the world of Heraclitus, cultivating mobility. As such, parmenidean cultures are conservative and retrospective, nostalgic about a past golden age, while heraclitean cultures are progressive and prospective, dreaming of a future golden age. Where does contemporary Orthodoxy fit in this schema? Is it parmenidian or heraclitean? Considering how most Orthodox market their tradition, Orthodoxy is the "ancient faith," decidedly apostolic and patristic, holding the whole truth and nothing but the truth, possessing all it needs, and missing nothing. And since the previous generations handed everything on to the present one, its task is merely to preserve what it received. Right. Thus understood, Orthodoxy is parmenidean, with a sense of triumphalism and overconfidence in the mix. It follows that the Orthodox remain today as they always have been, unchanged, ever the same, or so they believe. But there are cracks in the walls of this narrative. For example, currently they don't speak either Aramaic or Koine Greek, Christianity's original languages. They changed; they aren't the same. More dramatic is that they stopped following the apostolic and the patristic ways of doing things, namely, being faithful to the tradition's spirit and creative in new contexts. They have become retrospective and conservative instead; therefore, they changed. The Orthodox of our days are the product of almost two millennia of evolution, movement, and change, of hits and misses. They are never the same. They change with the times, regardless of the dreams and the anachronisms they hold so dear. Is then contemporary Orthodoxy heraclitean? Not quite. It is the nineteenth-century nationalistically reframed faith of the apostles and the fathers, still haunted by dreams of power, control, stability, and uniformity. For the Empire Never Ended, as Philip K. Dick would prophetically have it. As such, the Orthodox of today are parmenidean, though not genuinely traditional. Indeed, apostolic Christianity is neither parmenidean nor heraclitean; patristic Christianity is neither parmenidean nor heraclitean. Orthodoxy must be parmenidean as well as heraclitean, and more—static as well as dynamic, conservative and progressive. Corresponding to the Pentecost model, the Orthodox of today must preach the same Gospel message in the world's many idioms, continuously rephrased. There is something

changeable about their tradition, therefore, and something that must never change. The solution lies with the spiral movement.

*

The utopia of one Orthodox way makes the Orthodox churches insensitive and hostile to one another, each claiming to represent the one and only way. And while we merrily go our separate ways, we still claim commitment to the right way. "The Orthodox way goes like this," all say. Right. But let's see how things really go. Some churches celebrate Christmas in December and others in January. One church suspends all fasting between Resurrection and Pentecost, while the rest of them are more catholic than the pope. One church restores feminine ministries such as the diaconal one, and others cry out loud "heresy!" Several churches come together in one place, the others stone them from the fence on which they sit. Some churches speak to other Christians and to the world, some prefer their ivory towers. Some evoke history and customs; some imagine ancient roots; others have real power, of the worldly sort; all of them burn incense before the powers to be. No church upholds the Pentecost model, the shared infrastructure of all external differences; they all speak Babel's tongue, utterly divisive. Is this what we mean by the one and only Orthodox way? Is this the faith of the apostles and the martyrs?

*

Geography, culture, ethnicity, and language take precedence over the church's spiritual nature and aspirations. Because of considerations such as geography, culture, ethnicity, and language, we are a divided family, to the extent that some of us refuse to commune from the same chalice with the others. Human, all too human. While this situation is outright dreadful, sinful in fact, it isn't the most ridiculous side of our story. Let me explain. After we celebrate All Saints—an annual occasion to remember each other and those gathered at the heavenly altar—certain churches

replace the Second Sunday after Pentecost with one dedicated to their ethnic, local saints. They hold either the Synaxis of the Athonite Saints, or the Sunday of the Russian Saints, or the Sunday of the Romanian Saints etc. Geography, culture, ethnicity, and language. This unfortunate innovation marks our parting of the ways. We pray for things to be in heaven as they are on earth. We hope that our tribalism, which has damaged, perhaps irreparably, our ecclesial family, will be divinely sanctioned. As though the saints speak Babel's wooden idiom instead of Pentecost's fiery language. Imagine the heavenly kingdom scarred by jurisdictional borders: saints not talking to one another because of the colour of their skin, the language they speak, the culture of their upbringing, the different calendars the churches follow, and their contradictory views on ecumenism . . . It's a nightmare. What Pentecost? *Aferim*!

*

If anyone believes that the church will forever be the way it currently is should think twice, or in fact several more times. What happened to the Old Israel could happen anytime to the New one if it strays from the path (Romans 9–11). We hear the same message on Sunday night of the Holy and Great Week through the Gospel reading (Matthew 21:18–43). A few lessons are given there: the fruitless fig tree; the parable of the two sons; the parable of the unworthy workers. These lessons converge into the Lord's point about translating faith into life, together with his warning about the consequences of faithlessness. Now, you do the maths. What happens when the church resembles the fruitless fig tree? What happens when the church promises to do and doesn't? What happens, again, when the church sells the Gospel of God's Son for material gains and earthly power? Overconfidence ruins us, the New Old Israel. God does not need us and our arrogant claims of orthodoxy. As the Lord made humankind from the dust of the earth, God is able to raise up children to Abraham even from stones. And God will, as God did.

*

We were already free (Galatians 4:31; John 8:31–32). What freedom did the empire grant us then? The freedom to worship the emperor and the state—any other secular powers thereafter for that matter—authority, rules, and regulations, the ways of the world. The freedom to return to idolatry. And we did all this happily, hastily, irresponsibly. And, with "orthodox" zeal, we still do it. The blood of the martyrs is no longer the seed of Christians. Instead, we juggle canons and fortify our mighty jurisdictions. The smoke of our incense no longer reaches the heavens, instead enveloping the powers to be. We dance for joy before the golden calf. We were already free; not anymore. We are the children of a new old testament; slaves, not free people (Galatians 4:24–25). This is not Christ's paschal revolution! Christ is our holy Passover, the resurrection and the life, not the empire with its mock freedom. Not the empire with its inhuman, unloving, and inflexible rules and regulations. Christ's Gospel makes as free. Christ's Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

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We remember the Holy Three Hierarchs yearly, on 30 January. The scriptural readings for this celebration (Hebrews 13:7–16; Matthew 5:14–19) remind us that Orthodoxy is not reducible to the truth. Orthodoxy is truthfulness to the truth that touches the foundations of life, not just the mind. An ideological truth that stands by itself, not anchored in life, is futile; if Orthodoxy is that, then it's equally futile. It either is the truth that changes lives or nothing. And it cannot be reduced to mindless piety.

*

Throughout the liturgical year, we celebrate historical moments such as the ecumenical councils. This may seem befitting, since most of us believe that the ecumenical councils made Orthodoxy what it is. In a way, they did. But the Orthodox experience is by no means reducible to "the faith of the councils." The ecumenical councils of the first millen-

nium reacted to particular challenges, accordingly issuing decrees and formulae which address then burning matters. For this reason, their decisions are circumstantially conditioned and topically focused, not comprehensive and detailed. As such, they are incomplete. Furthermore, not one of these decisions treats the existential implications of the faith. Let's begin with an example of doctrinal incompleteness. The first ecumenical council—remembered in the Seventh Paschal Sunday, between Ascension and Pentecost—articulated our faith in the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ, but mentioned the Holy Spirit only just. This is, obviously, a partial articulation of the faith. Only the second ecumenical council completed the Creed by adding clarifications about the Holy Spirit and other items, from the church to baptism to the end times. Either way, there is nothing there, in the Creed of Nicaea and Constantinople, to do justice to the richness of the Orthodox experience. And it goes the same for the remaining councils. Is there a problem here then? In my opinion, there is. We believe that what made Orthodoxy are the ecumenical councils, but the councils provide us only with Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs. This being so, how could we reduce the Orthodox experience to conciliar decisions? These decisions do not say much about our faith and, above all, they say nothing about the criteria of the truth according to which no teaching should be maintained if it does not correspond to the broader Orthodox experience, to our way of life. Orthodoxy is the articulation of both faith and life as an entirely consistent, interconnected whole, not an ideological platform deprived of existential significance. Abstractions from this whole by sole commitment to formulaic certainties which have no bearing on everyday life—as it happens with the ideological Orthodoxy of our days—wound the church and will eventually destroy it. As though to prevent the collapse, the readings for Sunday of the First Ecumenical Council (Acts 20:16–18,28–36; John 17:1–13) sketch the framework where the decisions of this and other councils must be assessed. Specifically, unifying love and embodied faith, namely, the criteria which we, Orthodox, seem to have lost during our modern translation. Considered through the lens of unifying love and embodied faith, our ideological obsession with "the faith of the councils" ignores the very

tradition which we believe we uphold. And this is the source of many problems for the Orthodox today. We love simplistic formulae, but we do not love foreigners. We believe in things that divide, not unify. We preach grand ideas and fancy words, but never life, Christ's joy. We must not content ourselves with the breadcrumbs. We must follow them back, better than Hansel and Gretel did, to our true destination.

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Christ's holy church, God's city, cannot be reduced to any one definition or even to several more definitions. The Creed calls it "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Although Christ's church has taken diverse forms throughout history, it remains fundamentally one. It is holy, for the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of the saints, without all of its members being perfect. It is catholic par excellence, namely, encompassing and celebrating the fullness of life. It remains apostolic, but only insofar as it is faithful to the apostolic preaching, not to some ideological platforms. As such, it engenders new branches, leaves, and buds to this day—being apostolic does not require historical continuity—as Abraham's children are born even out of dry stones. But there are many more nuances to it. The church is traditionally creative. It cherishes the wisdom of past generations without ceasing to ever renew itself. It is orthodox, seeking to think correctly and to glorify God befittingly. It is methodist, for it is concerned with the way of treading the kingdom's path. It is pentecostal, for the Spirit is its life. It is adventist, deeply yearning the Lord's arrival in glory. It is evangelical, the Good News being the source of its mindset and ethos. It likewise is reformed, since, as the new creation, it reinvents itself while walking in the newness of life. And so on, and so forth. The many churches share in Christ's holy church, God's city, but no church is Christ's holy church, God's city, in exclusivity. The many churches must strive to become Christ's holy church, God's city, gathering within themselves what the others have in a greater measure. A wise way of doing that is by what we currently call receptive ecumenism, thus by learning from one another, emulating each other's strengths. Only in so doing will the many churches become "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic

church." Until they do so, the churches are merely shards of a broken mirror—a failed project—reductionist representations of what they claim to be and are not. Nor can they, as long as they walk as they do.

*

If we, Orthodox, reintroduced the kiss of peace at every liturgy and for all, not just clergy, there would be no need for such public shows as the "vespers of forgiveness." Ritualised forgiveness, once a year, does not fill the void either.

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Who we, Orthodox, are and how we truly think is on display within our calendar for all to see. What we see are male names upon males names. How did we get here? Are we one of the men-only religions? Have we forgotten that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:27–28) and that our gifts complement each other (1 Corinthians 12:4–26)? It is true that we praise Most-Holy Mary, Birth-giver of God (Gr. *Theotokos*) and Ever-Virgin, above all the saints, even above the angels. But during the Byzantine era—while we established major and minor festivals in her honour—our appreciation for womanhood decreased exponentially. An inconsistency! On the one hand, unmatched reverence for one woman; on the other hand, less and less respect for any other woman. This is obvious in that during that time the number of acknowledged saintly women dropped at an alarming rate. The lists of holy lives count fifty-five women from the second and the third century, and only fourteen from the fourth and the fifth century. At the end of late antiquity, the numbers dropped steeply. There are only four holy women from the sixth century, none from the seventh, and eight from the eighth and the ninth century together. This trend continued: five holy women from the tenth century, and one each from every century from the eleventh to the fourteenth, with none recorded in the fifteenth century. I do not even wish to look closer to our time. This is hard data.

This is our reality and we must understand what all this means. Simply put, this trend denotes the gradual degradation of the ecclesial mindset, which was replaced by androcentric and misogynistic drives. Just take note of the opposition with which the hardliners meet the idea of revitalising women's diaconate! I am certain that no one can actually believe that women became less holy century after century, while men steadily achieved more sanctity. It is the church which has become more androcentric century after century, changing into something it wasn't—to the extent that by now it lost its capacity to discern holiness without male attributes. And yet, every year we celebrate the Virgin Mother, several times annually. Why not doing so by drawing the right conclusions from our devotion? After all, the rule of faith teaches that we cannot believe in what we do not revere, and that we cannot revere what we do not believe in. What is, then, the significance of revering a woman above all men and angels? What does it mean that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female? To think like Christ (Philippians 2:5) entails to humble ourselves, not to promote androcentric messages. We must revisit our history in search for what we lost in its shadows. We must descend from the pedestal to the banks of Lethe, the river of oblivion—to live *aletheia*, the truth—in order to collect the names we ignored and then forgot. The names of our holy women, from the past as well as from the present. Meanwhile, the calendar shows who we are, disclosing our misogyny. The time has come to change this definition.

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Three centuries after the publication of *The Philokalia*, Saint Nicodemus' prologue still teaches us wisdom, addressing our difficulties. For one, we have not found out yet how to balance the inward call and our activity in the world. Saint Nicodemus shows that, while we gather within ourselves from the turmoil of the world, we must not ignore the world with its joys and pains. The inward quest means to discover ourselves truly, not to ignore everyone else. Indeed, only someone who dives inwards can embrace the world, loving people selflessly—working so that all become

one in Christ and have life in his name. The beginning of all unity is to return within; the unity of all is the end goal of the inwards movement. Thus teaches Saint Nicodemus.

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The shell is not the kernel; not at all. And because the shell cannot nourish us, we keep eating more of the same stuff in the hope that the emptiness we feel in our bellies will go away. This is a fairly good analogy, I think, for the church's relentless attempts to become "relevant" today. The church donates clothes, blankets, and food, builds hospitals, and organises fundraisers for good causes. It plants trees, saves the world, frees the oppressed, and welcomes refugees. It has a say on all matters social, economic, political, environmental etc. All this is important, of course, but none of it is the church. For one, all this is done, perhaps better than the church ever could, by the many ONGs in existence. And, then, the spiritual void we feel cannot be filled by more of it. The result of adding two or more zeroes will never be one, regardless of how noble the causes for which we fight. Saint Nicodemus warned—in his prologue to *The Philokalia*—that the void within the church can be filled only by its inward, prayerful turn. The ecclesial experience is to listen to the Gospel in deep silence, within the heart, where its seed germinates and gives fruit a hundredfold. In truth, the Gospel addresses the inner person, having less to say about the shell. The church, therefore, is not about the noisy gospels of the world. Of course, this doesn't mean that the church is, or that it should become, heartless. Likewise, this does not mean that Christians must not embody inner peace into compassion. After all, as *Letter to Diognetus* (6.1) has it, they are the soul of the world. But for someone to have a heart, one must gain it, not run away from what enlightens it. And enlightenment is not possible without listening to the Gospel in quiet prayer—nor is the retrieval of one's heart. One gives only one what has, better still, what one is. Many worthy ideals go wasted because what fuels them is merely heartless activism. Doing without being leads nowhere. Attempting to eat the shell instead of the

kernel will always leave our bellies empty. A church that does without being cannot avoid its big crunch. Against the tide, my resolve is to seek the inner side of the Christian experience, as Saint Nicodemus teaches.

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Since the source of true prayer is silence—for it is impossible to focus on it before quieting one's thoughts—how could liturgical noise engender prayer? Music and choreography are not the liturgy's goals. But we absolutise the means, namely, the arts. *Ars gratia artis*. We cultivate the arts disproportionately, substituting the means for peace, prayer, and fellowship, our true goals. Forms without content. Forms we endow with sacramental significance, which we end-up worshiping—and we do, since we can't even think of getting rid of certain futile items, the noise inherent to them. The golden calf. It's who we are, it's what we do.

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The current liturgical formalism and fondness for noise betray our spiritual immaturity as much as our wonderworking monomania. In the last century or so, except for very few saints known as theologians, for their service to fellow human beings, and for their martyrdom, respectively, what the churches keep acknowledging are wonderworking saints. Our forebears knew better than us, celebrating holiness in many more forms and shapes, with or without wonderworking manifestations. In turn, not many of us revere teachers of pure prayer, such as Saint Maximus the Confessor or Saint Symeon the New Theologian, who never waste a breath—or the equivalent thereof—on performing miracles. The miracle of one's transformation into a noble being bears no significance for us. What we seek are signs in heaven and on earth (Matthew 12:39; Mark 8:12; Luke 11:29). More forms without content. Rather, more symptoms of our spiritual immaturity. For only one sign matters—the new creation (Galatians 6:15), attained through interiorising Christ's cross (Galatians 6:14). Noise remains a hindrance. It should not come as a surprise that

there's no way for us of developing a taste for prayer, while most of us idolise wonderworking.

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Ours are apostolic times, an age of mission. People ask me why do we congregate in a building that isn't a church. I keep reminding them that the church, *ecclesia*, is the gathering of those whom God calls, not walls and fences. I tell them that not the places sanctify people, that good people sanctify the places where they gather by their prayer, by becoming the Spirit's temples. It's not the place what matters; it is the mode. Ours are apostolic times, an age of mission. We must stop living by default. We must stop substituting the shell for the content. We must return to the apostolic sense of the church—a community focused on teaching, prayer, fellowship, and mission—and to desist from worshiping buildings, musics, and shiny trinkets. Ours are apostolic times, an age of mission. What is the church's apostolic ethos? As we read: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers . . . Day by day, in one mind, they spent time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and simple hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42,46–47). This, in a nutshell, is the apostolic ethos. To be apostolic has nothing to do with past ages. Instead, it has everything to do with how we live in the here and now. It has everything to do with the world's salvation. Ours are apostolic times, an age of mission. We must wake up, we must stop censing the golden calf. We must become Christ's apostolic church. We need an Orthodox spring.

Matters of Discernment

If legalism is not intrinsic to the Orthodox mindset—since ours is not a law culture—then how should we express who we are? A wisdom culture such as our own speaks the language of the Way (John 14:6; Acts 9:2; Acts 18:25). But what is the Way and what does it entail? Above all, the Way is a person, Jesus Christ, the Way par excellence and the criterion of our discernment. He never issued commandments, except for one about loving one another as he loved us (John 13:34–35). This isn't a commandment after all; it's an example to follow. Instead of commandments, by living among us as one of us he taught us how to be, how to live. Related, the Way is a method which finds its perfect embodiment in Christ's mode of being. As we read in the prayer for the litany of offering in the liturgy attributed to Saint Basil the Great, Christ "has shown us the way to salvation." Christ is not a law promulgated with authority. Christ is an embodied method, Logos incarnate, the Way of life. There are no original writings that contain a systematic exposition of this method; it is written in his life, upon his body. Thus, when the Book of Acts speaks of our instruction in the Way of Christ, it means our fellowship with him, by which we learn how to walk in the presence of him who is the Way, namely, like him. As the author known as Saint Dionysius the Areopagite had it, deification means likeness and union—a matter of replicating a divine behaviour in God's own company (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3). And what do we find when we open this book, "this ancient record," Christ (as Saint Ignatius of Antioch called him in *Philadelphians* 8.2)? We discover certain parameters of how to live and

how to sharpen our discernment with every experience we have. Let's consider the following example. This book does not offer one solution for how to relate to other people. Instead, we find two solutions, quite wide apart in terms of their advice. On the one hand, forgive seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), we hear. On the other hand, we are told to not throw our pearls before the swine (Matthew 7:6). Both are the Way's words, as hard and politically incorrect as the second one might sound. What, then, are we supposed to do? First, we apply patience, and then, if it doesn't work, we pick up our toys and leave. How do we discern what solution to choose? Usually through hits and misses, namely, through experience. There is no rule here. Just parameters—the Way's own contours. Christ himself applied different approaches to different circumstances. He forgave the repentant sinner and chastised the arrogant righteous. He cursed the fig tree and died for his friends. Such is the Way. This is, then, what Orthodoxy itself, i.e. our method, must be. Specifically, rather than a written law or a collection of canons, Orthodoxy is a matter of discerning our personal and ecclesial path within the boundaries of the Way. As Saint Gregory the Theologian teaches, it is matter of moving up and down within the boundaries of the faith (*The First Theological Oration* 5). In order to move in this manner, after appropriating the given parameters we must step into the New Testament, becoming children of the covenant. The New Alliance is not about "do this or that"; it is about those who, attuned to the Way through deep conversion, are blessed for doing what they should. "Change your mind for the kingdom is at hand!" (Matthew 4:17). Orthodoxy, therefore, is to think the right way, by the Way, on the Way, together with the Way; discerning things, situations, and the values in the Way's light. There is nothing legalistic about it, nor the certainty of possessing the truth, nor trust in our own righteousness.

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False humility . . . It's all in the looks, not in the heart. Being deceived by false images of humility, people become unable to grasp true humility.

When they accidentally encounter it, they dismiss it because it does not exhibit the expected looks. As the author known as Saint Macarius the Great pointed out, contrary to the views of the crowds, "the strangeness of Christians does not consist in outward forms and signs" (*Spiritual Homilies* 5.4).

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The issue is not only with the inability of most believers to discern true humility from false humility. Problematic is their conviction that they, because they are many, are right. As Saint Antony warned, "The time is coming when people will go mad. When they will see someone who isn't mad, they will attack that person, saying, You are mad; you are not like us" (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Antony 25). Indeed, succumbing to worshipping the face of things, the undiscerning many grow arrogant because of their numbers. For one, they despise the advice of true humility when it doesn't show the "right" looks. The evangelist warns about them, "they trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). Invariably, as Saint Silouan the Athonite says in his diary, the eagle's insight is lost on the rooster, as the rooster's is on the many, overconfident hens. Much evil arises from this, within and without the church.

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Overconfident believers grow blind to the truth and insensitive to genuine humility. But things do not stop there. "Deceiving others and being deceived, they will go from bad to worse," as Saint Paul teaches (2 Timothy 3:13). Their lack of discernment leads them to oppress the saints who do not have the common "looks" of holiness. Saint Symeon the New Theologian warned about stubborn ignorance as what leads people to hating true holiness. He described a warfare "between light and darkness, faith and unbelief, knowledge and ignorance, love and hatred" (*Catechetical Orations* 15.1). What causes this conflict is the insufferable presence of eagles, read saints, in the midst of the overconfident

hens. In his words, again, "the divinely inspired word of a spiritual and holy person is like a double-edged sword in the heart of the carnal person" (ibid.). Being deceived by the face of things, the carnal person hates the truly spiritual person "out of ignorance and unbelief" (ibid.). Saint Symeon did not speak of atheists here. He spoke of the many and superficial believers who worship idols—read the shape of things, the appearance of humility—while they readily dismiss genuine humility and holiness. Their overconfidence wounds them, but it also causes much distress to the saints.

*

Many years ago I read a passage from Saint Augustine's *The City of God*, which, whether I understood it correctly or not, marked me profoundly. As I read then, God's city is both within and outside the church; the earthly city is both within and outside the church. Meaning, saints can be found both within and outside the church, and the same goes for sinners. I was never able to find those lines again, to check them out. Truth be told, I never read the *The City of God* in its entirety. But much later I discovered that, decades before, the *Spiritual Homilies* (5.1,4) attributed to Saint Macarius adopted a similar position: Christians are not those who look Christians on the outside; Christians are those who are Christians on the inside. And if the *Spiritual Homilies* made any impact on Saint Augustin's thinking, which is quite possible, then I must have gotten that passage right. What matters is that both authors, as far as I can see, warn against expecting to find only saints in the church and only sinners outside the church. More importantly, they both urge us to look beyond the face of things, where the truth of people can be found. This is crucial wisdom for exercising our discernment.

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But what does it mean that God's city is both within and outside the church? What does it mean to acknowledge virtue and holiness outside

the church? The early Christian literature is not foreign to these concerns. According to the evangelists, Christ himself affirmed the existence of Christians outside the church (Mark 9:38–40). He also ascertained the Spirit's freedom to liberate whoever the Spirit wishes (John 3:8). Early apologists such as Saint Justin Martyr and Saint Clement of Alexandria, together with the Cappadocian fathers, praised the virtues of contemporary pagans and heretics. In the same vein, monastic literature drew upon both canonical and noncanonical spiritual sources, the latter due to their high quality content. No wonder that the eighteenth-century collection of ascetic and mystical writings, *The Philokalia*, includes what seems to be a Stoic work attributed to Saint Antony the Great and several of Evagrius Ponticus' works, although his was a *nomen odiosus* for the mainstream. And so on. I suggest the following key to clarify this situation: virtue and holiness are possible where people can discern the marks of the Logos/Christ within the creation, that is, everywhere, where the Spirit also is—for the Spirit is where the Logos/Christ is. But if anyone can become a saint anywhere, then, one might wonder, why must one become Christian, why must one dive into the ecclesial environment? It is because the church serves as an authenticated framework and as an authenticating criterion for one's experience. Thus, one might become a saint outside the church, as the Spirit wishes, but as a member of the church one is able to check one's progress, or lack thereof. Take the example of Saint Mary the Egyptian. This example is only partially relevant, since she was baptised in her infancy. But it is suggestive in that for many years she progressed in the desert's utter solitude, without hearing the Gospel and without receiving the mysteries, the sacraments. Without the security of the ecclesial milieu, taught by the Logos himself, she advanced to the extent that she levitated in prayer and read people's hearts. Nevertheless, when her end drew near, she asked for the holy communion, the seal which confirms one's Christian experience. The church might not guarantee everyone's perfection, but the church offers certified guidance for the path which leads to virtue and holiness.

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Let me spell this lesson out from the other end. Saint John Chrysostom (*On the Priesthood* 6.2–3,5,8) pointed out that to acquire the virtues in society—as laypersons and as clergy—is more difficult than to be virtuous in solitude. The difference stems from the many temptations and burdens of people living in society, clergy and laity alike, and the very few temptations of those in solitude. But the circumstances cannot excuse either of them from at least trying to acquire virtue. The *Spiritual Homilies* warn that people who neither seek nor achieve virtue, whose mind is exclusively concerned with worldly things, can hardly deserve Christ's name. This amounts to saying that the Christians who do not pursue virtue, clergy and laity alike, are not Christians at all. Which further means that their chances to be saved and to reach holiness are very slim, Orthodox though they might be. In order to be saved and to reach holiness, one must rework one's life. But one doesn't do anything about what one doesn't consider problematic. For example, many among us believe that they are saved through baptism and/or through ideological commitment to what they construe as correct faith. In turn, they do nothing to tame their hearts through virtue and to become compassionate, and fail. The sacramental grace and ideological convictions won't made them holy without personal effort. In Saint Augustine's terms, they remain the earthly city within the church. They might boast as Christians, but they are not. They are foolish virgins and goats (Mathew 25:2,33). Christians are those who, whether from among God's people or not, fulfil the divine law written in their hearts (Romans 2:13–16,28–29) by pursuing virtue. They are God's city, whether within the church or outside it.

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A realisation. As the evangelists record, the Lord's antagonists were traditionalist, conservative, dogmatic, literalist, observers of canons, and upholders of liturgical rubrics. They were obsessed with certainty, religious people—not the Spirit's children, freedom's children. They adhered to the old ways. Read the Gospels! All of the Lord's sarcastic and castigating words are addressed to these religious fanatics, and to no one

else. Christ's Gospel (good news, not bad old news) is therefore against religion. Let the traditionalists, the conservatives, the dogmatics, the literalists, the observers of canons, and the upholders of liturgical rubrics call themselves whatever they will, but not Christians, because they are not. And let us be Christians, the Spirit's children, freedom's children, people of the good news and of the newness of life, the new creation.

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Paraphrasing a note of Isaac Asimov (in *Foundation and Earth*), what causes the lack of genuine Orthodoxy among Orthodox believers is that they prefer comfortable, warm, and established beliefs—regardless of how superficial and misunderstood they might be—"to the chilly winds of uncertainty."

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The Gospel of our Lord (John 18:4) teaches that for those on the Way the question is never "what do you want?" The true question is: "whom do you seek?" The Way is not about impersonal goals. It is a matter of being with another person, Christ, and with those together with that other, God's people. "The kingdom of God is within/among you" (Luke 17:21). The Way, as the kingdom, is an experience of personal communion, face-to-face, not a matter of acquiring something. Saint Luke called this event of togetherness "sharing salt" (Acts 1:4). Saint Maximus, in turn, throughout *To Thalassius* called it *sympnoia*, a matter of "breathing together." There is no more worthwhile goal than to meet and be with other persons—in this case Christ and his saints. This is the Truth of the Way of Life (John 14:6).

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I noticed how people react when they are ordained, and how others react when they meet an ordained person. Lacking discernment, both

believe that an ontological leap occurred and that, automatically, ordination transformed nobody into somebody—even a "holy father," saintly, wise, and knowledgeable. This is not what the saints teach. For example, the second-century saintly presbyter, Clement of Alexandria, clarified that no one should be regarded righteous because of being a priest; however, someone should become a priest for being a righteous person (*Stromateis* 6.13.106).

Travelling with the Lord

Ritual is not merely a spectacular form of remembering past events, which memorialises the divine economy of salvation through reenactment. Ritual is, in essence, the privileged way of experiencing faith's existential substance, its living content. Recapitulating and reenacting the events of salvation, ritual transports the participants from the here and now in the proximity of the events. As such, ritual is a transformative experience. More specifically, corresponding to motion through space, within God's people's sacramental framework the ritual movement through time—towards the remembered events—changes the participants. Ritual constitutes a mystical vehicle, a way of transferring the celebrating community into *illo tempore*, "at that time." Remembering, the believers become witnesses. But ritual does not move the believers only from the present towards the saving events of the past—it transports them to the eschatological realities which the events themselves foreshadow, signify, and anticipate. For, as Saint Maximus had it, the great deeds of salvation are "images of the future goods" (*Chapters on Theology and Economy* 1.90). The saving events prefigure eschatological realities. In this light, ritual—a sacrament of transfer and transformation—builds a bridge over the abysses of history, creating a knot between present times, the remembered events, and the kingdom to come. As such, it both changes its participants into witnesses of the events and renders them partakers of eternal life. Thus, it contributes to the continuous renewal of God's people in the here and now. But renewal does not take place in magical fashion, without believers' conscious, free, and purposeful participation. The sacramental bridge between ages and events must be

crossed by learning the ritual's lessons, or its mystagogy. If sometimes this prerequisite can elude us, the heavily ritualised Holy Week does not leave room for confusion. We must listen and learn.

*

The church suffers because of the spiritual inaptitude of the ignorant among us, clergy and laity alike. But what affects it more is the hypocrisy, the false humility, and the selfishness of some of its "shepherds," regardless of rank. Not that we have been left in the dark about this danger. Take the following example. Yearly, on Monday night of the Holy and Great Week we read the Lord's diatribe against the hypocrite and arrogant pharisees, grammarians, and temple priests who called themselves "fathers" and "teachers" (Matthew 22:15–23:39). Since we read this passage annually, it undoubtedly is for our instruction. By castigating the pharisees, the grammarians, and the temple priests the Lord denounces the imposture of those of us who also call themselves "fathers" and "teachers," matching the protagonists of the pericope. The "fathers" and the "teachers" repeat what the pharisees, the grammarians, and the temple priests did. And the text is quite explicit in regard to their hypocrisy, avarice, and arrogance. But as the "shepherds," so the "flock." Without calling themselves "fathers" and "teachers," the overconfident ignoramuses at the grassroots do the same, "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (Matthew 23:24). For them, it's all about holy beards, pious headscarves, conservatism, legalism, literalism, and lack of compassion for those whom the Saviour loves. Why do we read the Gospel if we do not listen to Christ's teaching? Is it merely because it's demanded by the order of the service? And is this a sign that we returned to being a religion of rituals and prescriptions? What is certain is that we greatly enjoy flaunting our phylacteries in public. *Vanitas vanitatum…*

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How shall we escape corrosion? How shall we heal? We must die and rise again, as the grain of wheat dies in order to bear fruit. Thus teaches, every year, the Gospel passage for Tuesday night of the Holy and Great Week (John 12:17–50). But what does it mean to die and rise again? It means to acknowledge our failures and to relinquish our old ways, shuffling off this sinful coil. It means to convert truly—to change our mind and to transform our life. The church's current form does not draw upon Christ's preaching. Nor does its heart appear to be in the right place. Emulating worldly institutions and organisations, the church of our age is not constituted around Christ's good news of freedom, love, and life. Its foundation is not the New Alliance's eucharistic banquet. There is no joy to it. The church is a new old testament of commandments, rules, prescriptions, and regulations. Letter, not spirit. Death, not life. It's a worldly system of which worldly people take advantage for worldly purposes. It is this system which must die so that the wheat of Christ's church can rise again. It is the church's current shape that must perish, as "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31; see 1 John 2:17). For the spring to arrive, we must walk while we have the light (John 8:12; 9:4–5). We must die to our old ways and believe in the light, becoming its children (Romans 13:11–14). Not all is lost; there are still oases in the desert, towns built on hills, and lamps lit in houses. But the grain of wheat will bear much fruit only if we live by the Gospel's message: "love one another" (John 13:34–35). That is, only if we "love with actions and in truth, not with words or speech" (1 John 3:18). God's people has no other commandments, rules, prescriptions, or regulations.

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Another cold shower, from the Gospel reading for Wednesday night of the Holy and Great Week (Luke 22:1–39). The Lord established the New Alliance—namely, God's people's very liturgy—during a meal, the same eucharistic banquet which he earnestly desired to share with his disciples. A covenant of remembrance, freedom, love, and joy. Indeed, the alliance was established during a rich meal shared among friends,

not in a session of procedural induction into the rules of ecclesiastical politics and administration. But while the Lord taught his friends about serving one another in humility and love, they responded deplorably. Judas betrayed him. The others argued for power and control. They were interested in weapons to defend themselves, not in loving their enemies. They promised to be with him till the end, but, as we know, they failed, except for the apostle of love and several courageous women. No remembrance, no freedom, no love, no joy. Thus are the spiritually inept. As his first disciples, so are we. Who's who? Who's what? Who's in charge? One ring to rule them all. How, then, can we ever hope to become children of Christ's covenant of remembrance, freedom, love, and joy?

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While pondering the Gospel readings for Holy Thursday night (John 13:31–38, 14–18:1; John 18:1–28; Matthew 26:57–75; John 18:28–40, 19:1–16; Matthew 27:3–32; Mark 15:16–32; Matthew 27:33–54; Luke 23:32–49; John 19:25–37; Mark 15:43–47; John 19:38–42; Matthew 27:62–66), one finds that together with the historical memorial of the Lord's crucifixion for the life of the world there runs another story. This second story, eminently theological, constitutes the framework where the narrative of the trial and the calvary must be deciphered. The last eleven passages piece together the historical tesserae of Christ's *theo-drama*; the first one sets the events against the backdrop of God's plan of salvation. The last eleven readings present the historical circumstances, while the first one unlocks the flow of events by revealing the Lamb's selfless, sacrificial will (echoing John 1:29,36 and Revelation 13:8). In this light, we realise that the Lord was not a victim of the circumstances; he orchestrated the events, using people's freedom in order to accomplish salvation. But the same theological narrative points—beyond the salvation wrought on the cross—to the need for us, God's children, to earn it. Christ commands us to be fruitful—not bodily, but spiritually—through selfless love for others. Salvation is complete only when we, God's children, replicate in our life Christ's crucifixion, loving one another (John 13:34–35; 1 John 2:7–11; 3:18–19; 4:7–12). Said otherwise, when we

replicate the paradigm of trinitarian love (John 17:21), which Christ's crucifixion makes known to all (John 3:16). Indeed, we are called to become for one another what the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are for each another. No wonder the liturgy urges, "Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." On the cross, the Lord showed us how to achieve it, selflessly, compassionately; now it's our turn. To sum all this up, as there is not only one side to the passion story, not only Christ's salvific input matters. Ours does too. Christ saved us through his crucifixion, but we must complete the circle by living as he taught us. Holy Week's processions, rituals, bell tolling, candlelight, endless chants—all this is symbolic decorum. All this becomes meaningful only when we love one another, as the Lord teaches and as Holy Thursday night's theological narrative instructs us. Without our mutual love, out of the two stories we merely hear one, entirely missing its point.

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How powerful are the passages from Ezekiel (37:1–14) and Paul (1 Corinthians 5:6–8; Galatians 3:13–14) prescribed for Holy Friday night! No lament there, no sadness. They focus on the outcomes of Christ's victory on the cross—our resurrection. While the children of darkness were devising further ways to silence the Word's message (Matthew 27:62–66), the apostolic collage points to the salvation which Christ won for us, namely, the blessing of Abraham, that is, the promise of the Spirit. To appropriate this victory, we must live as God's new creation. "Let us celebrate the festival, therefore, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8). There is no better way of celebrating Christ's victory than to change our lives. And if we stay the course in Christ, we become the new lump and the new creation (Galatians 6:15), truly resurrecting to the newness of life (Romans 6:4), in the here and now. Within this context, Ezekiel's prophecy is not only about the resurrection of all at the eschaton. It is also, if not primarily, about our mystical new creation, for the Spirit breathed again into us from above is not the soul. It is the Holy

Spirit, who once again bestows upon us the paradisal blessing of divine participation (Genesis 2:7; 2 Peter 1:4). Yesterday the Lord prepared us to bear with the dark joy of his persecutors. Today, our joy comes to the fore, since through his death we receive life. Glory be to him!

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The narrative of the tragic yet glorious journey of Christ—the crucified Lord of Glory—within the ritual framework of Holy Week invites us to explore our own spiritual journey as God's people. We cannot accomplish renewal without dying to our old habits, or rather to our ignorance and inadequacies. Ritual makes that possible, preparing us to enter the Paschal Week—an image of the eighth day which announces the unending day of the kingdom to come.

Community Rebuilding

The church is not a building. The church is the community of saints—as Christians are scripturally and liturgically called. After all, we pray "with all the saints." The familiar buildings are of no ecclesial consequence, rich in symbolism though they might be. Throughout history, Christians gathered in various places, not always being able to afford consecrated buildings full of symbolic items. They still do so, especially in lands where there is no consecrated space available for their gatherings. And while buildings are of no ecclesial consequence, the community itself is of utmost importance; the community is the church, God's people. All our efforts should focus on building communities, not walls.

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Building a Christian community begins with the reconnection of its members with the truth. I am not talking about the long history of reflecting upon the revealed truth, which they inherit from their forebears in the faith; I mean their own truth. The revelation of who they really are, so that the church is not built on lies.

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The revelation of how the members of the community really are—this is what the parable of the judgment (Matthew 25:31–46) teaches. The

main question this parable asks, accordingly, is not about the purity of their Orthodoxy. It refers to how they live it, either selfishly or selflessly.

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Since it is impossible for people, including the members of ecclesial communities, to assess their status objectively, it falls upon the preacher to draw their attention to the two paths, that is, life and death, selflessness and selfishness, knowledge and ignorance. The preacher must therefore stir the waters. He or she must not seek to appease people's conscience by soothing, congratulatory words. He or she must wield the prophetic sword of truth. The way of selflessness and knowledge is life. The way of ignorance and selfishness is death. In this case, *tertium non datur*. One path builds people and communities; the other ruins them. In delivering this disturbing news, the preacher complements the spiritual guide, who foremost works towards waking people up. In the absence of realisation, or awakening, there is no way of rebuilding oneself and the community.

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Rebuilding is impossible, personally and communally, without conversion and catechisation. What contemporary Orthodox do not understand is that authentic catechism is irreducible to ideology and exterior signs. To know a few trifles about doctrine, icons, and fasting does not make one Orthodox, not even when one grows a beard or wears a headscarf. What we must teach, learn, and apply is that in order to rebuild ourselves and our communities we must interiorise a corresponding way of thinking and living—mindset and ethos—both personally and communally.

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While basic catechism deals with the fundamentals of doctrine and practice, it would be a mistake to reduce Christianity to the perceptions available to beginners. Beginners themselves must progress. As a

learning society or a community of disciples—indeed a philosophical school, as the first generations of saints represented God's people—the Christian church furthers our instruction beyond basic training. It invites ongoing advancement in terms of discernment, awareness, and understanding. It challenges us to progress from sucking milk to chewing solid food. As Saint Paul teaches, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I understood like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I matured, I abandoned childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). Christians cannot remain beginners forever, complacent with what they learnt through elementary instruction. They must reach maturity (Hebrews 5:12–6:2). To tread on the Christian path is therefore not a matter of merely abiding by doctrinal stances, ethical imperatives, and religious prescriptions; it is to grasp the spirit of all this, thinking and living accordingly.

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Basic catechism corresponds to the Old Alliance of commandments, rules, and prescriptions. Maturity corresponds to the New Testament, of freedom, responsibility, and love. It is for the advanced that the Lord blesses those who take the initiative to do good without being told to do anything (Matthew 5:3–11). Whoever lives by another standard, endlessly munching at elementary instructions, hasn't yet reached the New Alliance. Signs of progress and maturity are when community's members begin to contribute to the church without being asked to do so. In turn, imposing upon them to breathe in and out only with due blessing is the surest way to infantilisation.

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That all of the community's members are called to advance on the path is a given. Neither the ranks of the ordained nor the charismatics (Ephesians 4:11) are appointed to rule over grassroots believers. They are entrusted with teaching, guiding, and leading the members in such a way, that the ecclesial body as a whole can progress beyond faith's infancy. The ecclesial hierarchies are there for no other reason, and their failure to

act upon their mandate makes them useless to God's people. They are there so that all believers advance from being "tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14) "to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). And when they reach maturity, the members should in turn nurture the spiritual growth of others. Only thus is the body alive and well.

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Grassroots believers cannot reach maturity without hierarchies, without proper guidance. Many believe that people can improve by themselves; therefore, they "google it" in the hope of getting smart. That might work well for the world. It won't, however, for a philosophical school—and the Orthodox church is one—which traditionally values hierarchies. By hierarchies I mean attainments in terms of spiritual worthiness, wisdom, and experience. No one can advance on the road less taken—the Christian path—without knowing the goals, without a defined method, and without appropriate guidance. No one, therefore, can progress outside the hierarchical ladder of worthiness, the apostolic succession of the saints. Christ enlightened the apostles, the apostles taught their own disciples, and disciples' disciples guided their own disciples. It might not happen at the push of a button, but this is the only way mature Christians are shaped. It cannot be otherwise.

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A successful society of learners, or a flourishing philosophical school—read a genuine ecclesial community—must be solidly anchored in axiological criteria. Hierarchies, when they work in the Spirit's parameters, are the outcome and the proof of solid criteria. But when the hierarchies are dysfunctional, such as when power takes precedence, not worthiness, the falsity of their axiological claims is obvious to all. When the Spirit's criteria are no longer the norm, when the pyramid of power is substituted for the hierarchy of worthiness, the school must be closed down

and reinvented. Genuine communities live only when what catalyses their rhythms is the Gospel's truth. True ecclesial hierarchies must be axiological and ministerial, not authoritarian. Only when we accept this basic truth and act on it can the church return to being Christ's school of disciples, which it no longer is. Saint Neilus warned us of the current situation long ago, in his *Ascetic Discourse*. Therefore, in order to rebuild our communities we must foster a context propitious for the birth of worthy guides. And to arrive there we must relearn what the church is, namely, a community solidly anchored in axiological criteria. The current system of institutionalised, pyramidal, power-driven hierarchies is not it.

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The ecclesial community cannot hope to establish a propitious climate for advancement as long as everyone forgets the basic truth that not all are on the same spiritual level. Forgetfulness, in this case, is as damaging as the current misrepresentation of hierarchy as a pyramid of power topped by ordained ranks. The ecclesial norm is that the church's members—ordained or not—undertake spiritual transformation. In turn, the level of one's transformation brings with it a certain level of perception. This truth hides in plain sight within one of our common prayers, "Grant, Lord, that we may be kept this day." The second half of this prayer blesses God's name three times, as Lord, Master, and Saint. Each one of the three blessings is accompanied by a request, respectively, to be taught, to be given understanding, and to be enlightened. These requests point to three stages of spiritual progress and perception. Not all believers reach the stage of illumination, or enlightenment, baptised though they might be. If they don't, they should not claim to know what the saints know. Also, not all believers reach the step of spiritual understanding, or insight, or discernment. If they don't, they should not claim to know what the saints know. We all should know where we are in terms of climbing up the ladder, so that we avoid the trap of hubris. That said, the three stages merely represent a schematisation of the spiritual progress, which is far richer. But even so, this schematisation reveals the axiological hierarchy of the community, the absence of which undermines the ecclesial life.

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Spiritual transformation is the goal we all must pursue, whether we are ordained or lay members of the church. Transformation progresses from learning the divine teaching to understanding it to be enlightened by it. Each stage entails a certain access to divine wisdom and a level of perceiving reality. The perception of one situated on the first stage is far less intense and comprehensive than the perception of one who climbed up the ladder to higher stages. Saint Silouan the Athonite illustrates this truth by the parable of the hens, the rooster, and the eagle. The hens spend their days looking downwards in search for food. Occasionally, they laugh at the rooster who—from their viewpoint—wastes his time sitting on the fence and gazing upon the courtyard from on high. But when the eagle descends nearby, telling the rooster about what reality looks like when it is seen from even higher, the rooster refuses to believe. Unlike the hens, God's people must humbly work upon themselves, patiently progressing, even though sometimes they might not understand what the rooster and the eagle propose.

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Here is my project for our little church, indeed, the mission to which I minister. This is my dream, my ideal: to recover the silent, prayerful heart of the liturgy. No bands, no choirs, no majestic hymns. Interiorised silence. Peace. Prayer. Long ago, a professor of liturgics reacted to a paper I read at a conference, on which occasion I used the phrase "hesychast liturgy" . . . He was right. What was I thinking? How could our liturgy be hesychast—silent and prayerful—when it's entirely about music and choreography? We, Orthodox, have become unable to cope even with a single moment of silence in our Sunday liturgy. We sing all through it. Some churches even sing the Psalms, the Creed, and the "Our Father." I do not wish you to believe that I am against music. I appreciate music and I enjoy singing in church; modesty aside, I'm quite good at it. But that is not the issue. In our modern liturgy, the shell—in this case, music—wholly supersedes the prayerful, communal, and eucharistic essence

of the liturgy. The form has become more important than the content. After witnessing one of our noisy liturgies, someone who never prayed before has no idea what a prayer might look like. Apart from the "Our Father" (only in some churches, not all) and the final prayer, our liturgy is made of endless songs and interjections. Couldn't we read some of those songs, instead of allowing them to obscure the liturgy? Couldn't we give a chance to the actual liturgy, its prayers—which belong to all, not to the ordained celebrants—to be heard by all and be answered, as they should, with the "Amen" of the entire congregation? Our little congregation sings only a few songs, especially in the liturgy's first part, to allow the eucharistic prayer to upsurge from quieted hearts. What we (re)discovered is of utmost significance. Once the liturgy regains its interiorised silence and prayerfulness, it teaches us how to officiate, even how to sing, and, finally, how to build a better world. For the liturgy still culminates with the sending of the congregation into the world, "Let us go forth in peace!" If the congregation hasn't acquired peace in the liturgy, what will it bring to the world? Songs won't do.

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The evil from within us will grow increasingly obvious. It will become more and more unable to hide behind false piety, false politeness, false humility, liturgical boxes, long beards, headscarves, black cassocks, the ecclesiastical order, and any other hiding places. We don't even have to reveal it. Our noise advertises it. Its poisonous fruits will betray the bad tree. Granted, some of us will continue to eat it, but they will get terribly sick and, in so doing, they will wake up and understand that the current course is untenable.

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The "living water" which flows from the hearts of believers (John 7:38) is not still water, a latent characteristic or a passive state. As Saint John Chrysostom perceived it, it is water, our very life, which has a "living energy of sorts" within it (*Homilies on Genesis* 3.1). Indeed, the Spirit's holy

grace infuses it completely and makes it effervescent. Divinely permeated, the "living water" is a spring which "wells up to eternal life" (John 4:14). It reveals the kingdom present within us (Luke 17:21), where it grows like the mustard seed—to become a tree which shelters the birds of the sky (Matthew 13:31–32). The "living water" makes us more than bearers of life, givers of life. It makes us "spiritual bread for others," as Father Dumitru Stăniloae understood it. Holiness, or the "living water," the offspring of peace, is what ultimately builds our communities.

The Spiral Movement

There is something paradoxical about the spiritual progress. Transformation does not happen one way, by advancing from a stage to the next one, after the fashion of mountaineering. The mechanics of the spiritual progress is more complex than this. Yes, progressing spiritually means advancement, but one does not move forward by leaving behind an earlier stage. It actually happens by ever returning to whatever one had previously accomplished. Time and again. Let me explain. Let's look again at the three blessings in "Grant, Lord, that we may be kept this day." These blessings mark the gradual acquisition of insight into God's mystery—as Lord, Master, and Holy—and also our advancement from learning to understanding to illumination. In all three cases, advancement is by adherence to God's statutes, or judgments. And this is the crux of my argument: we advance by referring to the same fundamentals of God's wisdom; the point of reference does not change while we keep growing spiritually. We become mature and progress by adhering to the same axiological criteria, divinely revealed. From the other end of the process, in order to build higher we must continuously consolidate our personal foundations. The principle of growing humbly—namely, by returning to the beginnings—is essential for the ecclesial community and the experience of its members. Humble advancement means reinvention and renovation, read revolution, read return to the community's authentic principles. The annual cycle of scriptural readings—the Orthodox lectionary—confirms the significance of this principle. Every year, indeed,

we progress by returning to the same wisdom lessons, not by visiting other readings. This is the spiral movement.

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Many believe that while the ancient traditions followed cyclical patterns, Judaism and Christianity invented the arrow of time. I don't know about Judaism, truly. What do I know is that, traditionally, Orthodox Christianity combines the straight line and the circle. Our arrow of time is a spiral.

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The spiral movement of the spiritual journey combines, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite tells us (*On the Divine Names* 4), the straight line and the circle. The straight line moves from the Alpha to the Omega. In turn, the circle shows that the Alpha is the Omega and the Omega the Alpha (Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). What does this mean? While the straight line denotes the direction towards which advancement unfolds, the circle reveals how advancement occurs. And it occurs by executing again and again the same movement. In the desert, Saint Antony the Great was providentially shown that the solution to his concerns was to keep repeating what he was doing (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Antony 1). Here, paradoxically, persistence in repetition amounts to advancement, not to an endless feedback loop. Contrary to the modern myth of progressing through acquiring new things, in the spiritual life the fundamentals of wisdom are irreplaceable. Returning to the Alpha is the only way of attaining the Omega. Humble, patient return to the basics secures fulfilment. It goes the same for the ecclesial community and its members. From time to time, believers might think that they have already reached perfection. Likewise, the community might grow oblivious of its nature and purposes. To avoid these pitfalls, both the members and the community must keep renewing their way of thinking. They must patiently walk on the path of wisdom through genuine humility, that

is, returning every day to the fundamentals of God's people's mindset and ethos.

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The spiral isn't just a matter of moving on with the times. The spiral isn't a matter of living in the past either.

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The spiral movement has two dimensions, one internal, one external. The internal dimension refers to the ongoing, humble return to the sources—or to the Alpha—for personal as well as for communal renewal and progress. This is a dynamic event, not a retrospective. As Saint Gregory the Theologian taught, it entails moving up and down along the straight line and within the given framework (*The First Theological Oration* 5). To be more specific, the spiral's internal dimension refers to the ongoing process of refreshing memory and renewing life, which occurs by reappraising the fundamentals of the tradition. Renewal, furthermore, deepens our grasp of the principles, "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). This dynamic is obvious about the way we access the truth. As the Lord handed on the truth that sets us free (John 8:31–32), it is the Holy Spirit who leads us to its fulness (John 14:26). The truth is already there, but not quite yet. We already received the truth, but we are yet to grasp it fully. It is for this reason that the spiral of advancement must unfold for as long as we cross the sea of this life, so that our grasp of what was revealed to us becomes increasingly accurate, nuanced, and encompassing. In turn, the external dimension of the spiral movement replicates the experience of mountaineering. The circle moving along the straight line goes up and up, executing increasingly tighter circles. The result is a cone, or a mountain, if you wish. While they climb it up, the mountaineers reach higher places. Have you noticed how clear are the immediate details due to proximity, and then how they fade away when we climb up higher? But what we lose in the haze of distance, namely, the details, is incomparably surpassed by attaining increasingly broader

perspectives—the vision of the whole, reality "unified as a single ray of the sun" (Saint Adomnán of Iona, *Life of Saint Columba* 1.1; 1.35). The higher we go, the more we see. *Non multa, sed multum*. The divine bird's eye view—the eagle's perspective—unlocks for us more vistas than the close observance of some legalistic prescriptions can ever do. And since the spiral movement is asymptotic, going on and on, we should expect ampler and ampler perspectives, more and more surprises. No room for fooling ourselves that we're there yet, that we reached perfection, and that Orthodoxy's sole province is the past.

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The spiral movement, always the same and ever new, brings things into sharper focus. Repeating the same routine every day, every week, every year, we advance in wisdom and discernment. We see better and we understand more. We progress, that is, towards a deeper realisation of who we are and what we must become—we travel towards further wisdom and understanding. Acquiring more wisdom and understanding is at the heart of the ecclesial community and its members. Wisdom provides an authenticated knowhow, so that we do not stray from the path. Understanding grounds us in the here and now, where new challenges occur day by day, and where we must bring good news of peace and compassion. The spiral movement of wisdom and understanding, therefore, leads to the cruciform experience of becoming who we are, more and more, and of opening up to the world, increasingly more.

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The best exemplification of the spiral movement remains, from my viewpoint, the annual Orthodox lectionary. Established centuries ago, our lectionary prescribes the same readings for the same Sundays of the year, year after year. This is neither lack of imagination nor lack of interest in other passages. It is a matter of choice. But, regardless of the reasons behind this choice, what matters is what happens. The straight line and the circle combine harmoniously within the recurrent annual

cycle of readings. Again, the annual repetition of readings is both a circle and a straight line. It is a circle because the cycle begins and ends in the same point, the Paschal night. It is a straight line because the cycle repeats itself every year, to the end of time. As a circle, the liturgical year leads us back to the basics, which we are supposed to understand increasingly better. As a straight line, the annual repetition of readings facilitates the broadening of our perspectives. It follows that by reading the same passages every year, we have the double opportunity to refresh our awareness of the fundamentals and to open up new vistas of understanding—to explore the implications of wisdom past for the realities of our own time and place.

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Contrary to the spiral movement, which occasions renewal and progress, the ecclesial community risks to lose the path in two ways. One way is by drowning into the pond of its idealised past. This kind of community, retrospective in its outlook, does not seek to understand its true foundations. Instead, it happily collects, stores, and labels past achievements without retrieving the spirit that led earlier generations from glory to glory even at the cost of occasional failures. The trajectory of this kind of community is not a circle; it is a straight line whose spearhead points backwards. This community turns into an archive and a warehouse. Whatever happens outside its comfort zone has no bearing whatsoever upon its rhythms. The perfect ivory tower. But the life of a community unaware of itself and of its present circumstances is merely past tense; its life is death. Turning to the other way of failing, there are communities which lose their path within the labyrinth of daily life. This kind of community reacts to every new thing, on the spot. It screams against, it lobbies for, but beyond its impulsiveness it does not know why and what for. It merely stays attuned to this age, being militant, active, and "relevant." The wisdom acquired in the past is of no interest. No wisdom matters. What matters for this community is to move on with the times, regardless of the costs, regardless of its loss of identity. The trajectory of this community does not take the form of a circle either; it is a straight

line which points forwards. Rather, a matter of aimlessly rushing through things, towards the next crisis. The alternative for the standstill of the first way and the amnesia of the second way is the spiral movement.

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The same goes for the believers who ignore the spiral movement. Without their ongoing return to the basics, without agreeing that they are beginners and, therefore, that they should begin anew every day, they assume that having begun to learn the alphabet amounts to full enlightenment. As such, they skip stages and take shortcuts. They wear piety's headscarves and the beards of holiness. They gratuitously pontificate about "the ancient faith" and shun the "impious" who are more familiar with the tradition. For believers of this kind, it's all in the looks and in their mind; in theory, not in reality. In turn, the spiral teaches that, without patiently toiling to become what we fancy ourselves to be, we cannot be so foolish as to presume that we already are. Yet we do. Nevertheless, the will to change does not bring the change of mind and life automatically. In *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Theodore of Ferme 9), an elder mocked a fellow who thought he knew everything before undertaking diligent study and ascesis. The elder told him off: you haven't booked the boat, you haven't loaded your luggage, you haven't begun the journey, but you teach about its end. Such are, too, those who believe they are without undertaking the spiral movement. The spiral is what heals their presumptuousness. It shows that advancement occurs through humble repetition over time, not when the lightning strikes.

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In the past, idealistically, I took literally the monastic saying which says, "give will, take power." I thought that if I desire something, say, holiness, I can undoubtedly achieve it—that if my will is right, wise, and divinely oriented, God's grace will supply the rest. Then I realised that my conviction drew on a commercial for sport shoes from the early 90s, "I want, I can." And given my thorough suspicion about slogans—doubled by my

inability to achieve what I desired—I slowed down, I sat down, and I began to rethink my life. Said otherwise, I curbed my ambition to attain holiness in my youth, and I returned to the drawing board. I remembered that the Lord teaches realism, "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). I understood that it does not suffice to give will and then expect God's grace to work. Both are, of course, important. But it takes much more than that—diligence on the path, ascetic consolidation, stability in doing good, ongoing study, continuous sharpening of my discernment—to be victorious. I realised that the straight line of advancement does not work without the circle of humble and tenacious repetition. I realised that the spiral's humble return to the fundamentals is to anchor my life in the good through the practice of the virtues. I realised that I had to become what I thought I were.

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We know that we managed to advance a little only when we consistently begin every day as though it's our first on the path, patiently renewing ourselves through relearning. It would be foolish to rely on yesterday's achievements and not lay the foundation every day. Building the new creation does not happen after the fashion of a house or a bridge, where the foundation is laid once and for all. Climbing up the ladder of the virtues is a matter of climbing it every day from the beginning, not a matter of taking another step every day.

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The saints teach that we must begin every single day from the scratch. Here is an example. Dazzlingly shining on his deathbed, Saint Sisoes confessed to the brethren his deep conviction: "I do not think I have even made a beginning yet." This being his thinking, he prayed to live a little longer so that he could begin his repentance (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Sisoes 14). Even without being as humble as he, taking our cue from his example we must stop flattering ourselves that we already achieved holiness. Thus, rather than concerning ourselves with what

further ascetic stages lie ahead—as Saint Zosimas in *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* did—we must relearn the rules of engagement every single day. So shall we live, day by day, as the new creation. This is wisdom we learn from the spiral movement.

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As with the person, so with the community. It is not built once and for all. It must be renewed every day, in Spirit and in Truth. The humble approach excludes false certainties and comfort zones, drawing us back to perceiving the kingdom as an ongoing effort to renew. What does Orthodoxy amount to without this wisdom? Why, pharaonic buildings, the confusion between God's people and nationality, the deception of having attained holiness because we put on a cassock, a headscarf, or a beard, the arrogance of having a monopoly on the Truth—as they say, Orthodoxy possesses the Truth. But the Truth is a person, not a thing; how can anyone possess the Truth? When the community fools itself that it already is, ceasing to renew itself in Truth and in the Holy Spirit, it becomes self-sufficient, self-confident, triumphalist. And when it stops being the new creation, its spirit does no longer draw upon the Gospel's well. Its rhythms are no longer the spiral movement. But, beware, the alternative to the spiral renewal is certain death.

The Resurrectional Life

"Christ rose from the dead and trampled down death by death, granting life to those in the tombs." We sing this hymn—every year—from the Resurrection to the Ascension, to proclaim our own resurrection from the dead, to the newness of life (Romans 6:4). We are those in the tombs of darkness, ignorance, and sin. We are the dead risen to the true life. And now, receiving Christ through faith, believing in the name (John 1:12) of him who is the life and the light of the world (John 1:4; 8:12; 11:25–26), we have access to the source of life, the giver of life—the Holy Spirit who ever is with Christ and whom the Lord imparts to us (John 1:32–33). Thus are we reborn as "children of God . . . born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12–13), becoming "partakers of the divine life" (2 Peter 1:4). Accordingly, we see the glory of the Onlybegotten of the Father, "full of grace and truth," and from whom we receive "grace upon grace" (John 1:14,16). Seeing is becoming. What we behold, that we become. And when we become what we see (Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2), "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, gaining the freedom of the glory of God's children" (Romans 8:21). This, in a nutshell, is the paschal mystery, no more, no less. This is Christ's paschal work, and the Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

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Christ is risen! To rise in Christ, here and now, means to open our mind and heart to understand the nature of things. And the nature of things

is life—the fulness of life. Until we are reborn in Christ and with him, our perception of reality is dramatically limited, impaired, twice veiled; for this reason, our life is not full, but shallow. The veils of the mind are ignorance and our passionate attachment to the surface of things (Saint Maximus the Confessor, *To Thalassius*, prologue). A veiled mind cannot escape shallowness. The following analogy gives us an idea of what shallowness is. Let's imagine a unidimensional universe, specifically, our very selves living in a flat world, as thin as a sheet of paper. There is neither depth nor height to this form of existence. Nothing beyond the surface of things. Now, figure it out: this is precisely how we live before we meet Christ. We lead a shallow, unidimensional life, accumulative and pointless, being extremely passionate about it. Truth be told, we are absolutely passionate about merely nothing. At best, what we are so much passionate about has the consistency of that sheet of paper. But our superficial attachment to the outer shell of things is not without consequences: it deceives, giving us the impression of being alive. And since the surface of things is insubstantial, it requires from us to seek more of it. Thus are we caught in the vicious circle of a pointless existence. Ignorance will keep entertaining our reassuring narrative, however, only until the Light shines in our darkness too—unbearable, invincible, dispelling ignorance. When that happens, we must stop living in denial; we must stop lying to ourselves. When that happens, we must open our mind and heart, seeing the depths beneath and the heights above our sheet of paper. This is the promise of the Gospel: fullness, not emptiness. Christ is the promise. This is what he promises: I am the life of the world; I am the light of the world; I am the bread of life; I will give you the living water; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the true vine; I am the way, the truth, and the life. When we wake up to him from shallowness, from our current death, we live; we walk in the light; we eat and drink; rivers of living water well-up from our heart; we walk under guidance, not aimlessly; we change and live truly; our existence is grafted into the vine of eternal life; we slide through the rabbit hole towards the wonderland of truth and life. When that happens, our sheet of paper gets depth and height. Life and

perception become more intense and ampler. This is Christ's paschal work, and the Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

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Christ is risen! What happens when we do not experience any of it, that is, the great changes of perspective brought about by our true conversion? What happens when we continue to live a shallow existence, accumulative and pointless, as thin as a sheet of paper? And what happens when, while we believe that we're converted and committed to Christ, we still hate—or at least not love—people because they are not of the "right" ideological, religious, cultural, or ethnic colour? First of all, the absence of love proves that we haven't met Christ yet, no matter how "orthodox" we think we are and how committed to the "ancient faith" we might be. But, then, when we realise that we do not love people and that, worse, we hate them, we must begin the spiral movement. In time, the spiral movement frees us both from our shallow existence and from hateful religiosity. Change is possible for whoever wishes it. Change we must. Change we can; the Lord wishes it. This is Christ's paschal work, and the Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

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Christ is risen! To undertake the spiral movement, I keep saying, is a matter of revisiting old certainties in order to understand more and better, to progress, to become mature. As Saint Gregory the Theologian urged, "let us philosophise within our proper boundaries" (*The First Theological Oration* 5). We must live and reflect within the confines of the tradition, but we should do so freely, creatively, and joyfully, moving up and down the straight line. On the one hand, the framework, the boundaries of the tradition. On the other hand, the freedom of philosophising and thinking. We already know that when they combine—namely, the framework, represented as a circle, and free thinking, represented as

a straight line—what results is a spiral. The spiral allows us to move up and down within the framework. Now, let's learn from this lesson, not merely repeat what we heard. Let's apply this way of thinking to everyday life, transforming knowledge into a practical tool. What results from philosophising within the boundaries of the Third Paschal Sunday? The two scriptural readings (Acts 6:1–7; Mark 15:43–16:8) list certain functional reversals. Men perform feminine tasks, I mean Joseph and the seven deacons; women perform masculine tasks, I mean the myrrh-bearers. And we read these passages on the Third Paschal Sunday since when? Perhaps since the fourth century? And what have we learnt after all this time? That men are the masters and that women are their slaves . . . That men rule and women serve . . . That men are smart while women must shut up . . . This is not what happens within the living body, where all the parts minister to all the parts. Since the church is Christ's body (Ephesians 4:11–16), then all its parts must minister to all its parts, complementing each other and supporting each other. The Third Paschal Sunday teaches, therefore, that in Christ Jesus there aren't masters and slaves, active members and passive members; it teaches that functional reversals are part and parcel of our ecclesial experience. The myrrh-bearers are evangelists; they do not shut up. Joseph performs the burial rite and the deacons serve at the common meals. What does all this mean today in terms of the ministry of men and women within the church? What did we actually learn after centuries of reading these passages? Nothing. Old wine in old wineskins. But the Lord reveals to us the true purposes of his Gospel: "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Change is possible for whoever wishes it. Change we must. Change we can; the Lord wishes it. This is Christ's paschal work, and the Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

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Christ is risen! Here is another example of philosophising freely within the framework of the tradition: Mid-Pentecost, a festival held on the

fourth Wednesday of the Paschal season. Three levels of reflection can be discerned here. As shown by the Gospel passage read during the liturgy (John 7:14–30), this celebration takes as a pretext the Lord's preaching in Jerusalem on the occasion of the festival of the Booths, midway between Passover and Pentecost. This feast was held in remembrance of Israel's desert pilgrimage. There and then, Christ shared with his listeners that, as they circumcised a newborn male in the eighth day even on a Saturday, against the sabbath prohibitions, he was allowed to heal people on Saturdays too. The true measure of the Mosaic law was to do good, not to abide by its ritual prescriptions. Christ's explanation represents the first stage of philosophising, of retrieving the meaning of things. Thus, the sabbath prescriptions represented the means by which the goal of doing good was brought to the fore. Here is the second stage of philosophising. By holding Mid-Pentecost, the Christian church takes hold of the Mosaic festival of the Booths, transforming it into a different sort of event. The day's hymns sing a new song—about the resurrectional life the Lord inaugurated for us. And here is the third stage of philosophising, which follows from the above. By celebrating Mid-Pentecost, believers are challenged to profoundly renew their understanding of the tradition, freeing themselves from the heavy burden of religious prescriptions in order to do good. They are called to lead the life that Christ inaugurated for all—a life of freedom, love, and compassion—not to establish a new old testament of cold rules and regulations. Accordingly, true Christians safeguard the wellbeing of the neighbour, emulating the Good Samaritan, not abandoning the neighbour in times of peril out of religious concerns (Luke 10:30–37). Christ did not die and rise for religious customs. Christ died and rose for all of humankind and for the creation in its entirety. This is Christ's paschal work, and the Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

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Christ is risen! Moving towards the end of the paschal season, one realises more and more the derelict state of contemporary Christianity,

including its Orthodox iteration. Materialism, xenophobia, racism, and misogyny are on the rise, especially in traditionalist, or conservative, quarters. Materialism? Yes, wealth is a sign of divine election, and you can't be a member because you're neither rich nor influential. Xenophobia and racism? Yes, it's good to be white, and since we're here why should anyone else be? Stay with your people, go back to your country; the fact that your faith convictions coincide with our own doesn't concern us. Misogyny? Yes, women should shut up, put the headscarf on, and obey their male superiors. And so on, and so forth. These conservative "values" are explicitly at odds with the three Sundays leading to Ascension. Let's take the Fourth Paschal Sunday (Acts 9:32–42; John 5:1–15). People receive healing and one believer is brought back to life. All good; praise the Lord! But is there any change of life they undergo after being freed from illness and death? They surely must feel something, see differently, do things otherwise, so that the miracles are not wasted on them. Granted, we cannot answer these questions, since Scripture does not tell the story of the aftermaths. But these questions are nevertheless important, concerning us too. We are in the same position, for Christ, risen from the dead, grants us life, those in the tombs. And, as resurrected people, we must walk in the newness of life. But how? The Fifth Paschal Sunday (Acts 11:19–30; John 4:5–42) gives three answers. First, the principle of true life is located within, not without. The true life is to experience the divine presence in my heart, which becomes a spring of water gushing up to eternal life—not a matter of gathering dust. Material goods are neither who I am nor the principle of life; they are what I might have or not have, but they cannot define who I am. Being either rich or poor is not who I am. I must nurture who I truly am so that I do not hear the terrible voice in the night, telling me that this is it, and that my acquisitiveness led to nought (Luke 12:20–21). The measure of who and what I am is given by the sweet warmth of the Spirit's breath in my heart. Therefore, to walk in the newness of life is to cultivate God's grace poured into my heart. Second, to walk in the newness of life is to live a Christlike life, loving all people equally. No more Samaritans and Jews. No more Jews and Gentiles. God's love makes all people equal,

sisters and brothers, beloved children of one Father (Matthew 5:44–45). Altruism, compassion, and hospitality towards all must be our norm, not random exceptions from racism and xenophobia. The latter are against the newness of life. Third, while the disciples were puzzled and lacked understanding, the Samaritan woman became an apostle and preached to a whole city. Imagine what would have happened had she "conservatively" cowered, shutting up, hiding behind the headscarf, and obediently going by the "tradition" that banned women from speaking in public. To walk in the newness of life is to recognise that gender stereotypes and customs do not define one's humanity. Not in Christ. Cowardice and courage do not pertain to gender; they pertain to personal character. Women should not shut up in church and wear the headscarf of obedience as a sign of their gender. When will you, proud man, wear your own headscarf of obedience? Aren't we all, men and women, Christ's brides? And when will you, proud man, keep quiet humbly, instead of presuming silly things about Christ's Gospel? Aren't we all supposed to listen to the Lord? To walk in the newness of life as bearers of the paschal message means to open the eyes of understanding. This is the message of the Sixth Paschal Sunday (Acts 16:16–34; John 9:1–38): to see things differently and to do things differently, not as Babel's children. It means to see things in the light of the risen Lord, to live and to act accordingly. This is Christ's paschal work, and the Gospel makes no other promise. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glory be to him!

*

Christ's ascension! The Lord's ascension! "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The Lord is with us, forever pitching his tent in our midst, his people (John 1:14; Revelation 21:3). Knowing that he is where we gather in his name (Matthew 18:20), we exchange the kiss of peace at every liturgy, saying, "Christ in our midst! He was, is, and will be!" Ascension, therefore, is not departure. What is it then? It is a temporary occultation of the Lord who prepares a place for us within the Father's home (John 14:2–3), in his kingdom—the

mystical name of the Holy Spirit, who is everywhere. While hidden from our earthly eyes by his tremendous glory, which the saints have seen and continue to do so (John 1:14; Acts 7:55; 2 Peter 1:16–18), the Lord opens the way of our own glorious ascension. His ascension is the signpost of our destination. As we confess in the liturgy, "You raised us up again, and left nothing undone until you brought us up to heaven and bestowed on us your kingdom to come." We are already there, with him and through him, but we do not know it yet. One day, however, our treading the path will be rewarded with true sight. Then we shall see him, the glorious Lord who is everywhere, when we will become like him (Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2), resplendent in glory (Matthew 13:43). This is the mystery of today: as we rose with him from the dead, so did all of us ascend with him when he ascended in glory. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. Glorify him!

*

Pentecost! What is Pentecost? It is the very content of God's people's experience. It is light and life for God's children; the kingdom within, for the Holy Spirit is in the hearts of God's daughters and sons (Galatians 4:6); light and life for the world, for out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water; light and life, the light of life, so that no one walks in darkness (John 7:37–53; 8:12); ineffable "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-mastery" (Galatians 5:22–23). What is Pentecost, furthermore? The manner in which the content of God's people's experience—light, joy, and life—must radiate towards all, reverberating throughout the world, reaching out to those who are thirsty. Pentecost is the Spirit's gifts, imparted to all of God's children, which empower us to minister to one another within the church and as a priestly nation to the world. It is our calling to speak the languages of the world, to proclaim the good news to all in meaningful ways, so that people can understand the Gospel (Acts 2:1–11). Not sacred languages; spoken languages. Not "angelic" tongues; real languages. Not anachronistic dreams of the "golden age"; today's culture. These

are the tools to be used in conveying the good news; Pentecost's tools. Pentecost! How do we celebrate it? By remembering what the content of God's people's experience is, and by learning to replicate the event within our current circumstances. Remember and learn!

*

Pentecost! What is Pentecost? It's the ongoing event of the Spirit hovering as wind over the waters of creation in order to energise the cosmos for its long journey towards perfection. As a moment in time, Pentecost is the same hovering of the Spirit as wind and fiery tongues over the Christian gathering in Jerusalem, imparting to all present—men and women—gifts for growing up in Christ, for reaching maturity (for this is what "be fruitful and multiply" means, not an increase in numbers), and for ministry. As a succession of moments in time (for this is what happens every time we invoke the Spirit at the liturgy and when we call the "Heavenly King" in the quiet of our hearts), Pentecost is the renewal of God's gifts, the reenergising of the waters so that God's people thrive, minister, and bring light to the world. But what happens when the church does not make use of the gifts of all those who receive the Spirit's fiery breath? Case in point, our church does not make use of the gifts bestowed upon women. What happens to the wasted gifts, and what happens to the church that wastes them? To answer these questions indirectly, one could reflect on what might happen if half the cosmos would not respond to the hovering of the Spirit over the waters of creation. This, indeed, is our situation. We use only half of the Spirit's gifts, half of the divine energy flowing through the veins and arteries of Christ's body. Feminine charismata are as important as the masculine ones within Christ's body. Remember and learn!

*

A new Pentecost cycle of Sundays: All Saints. The new cycle begins with a festival of church's membership, of all believers, for this is the meaning of All Saints. It is not only a celebration of the saints whose names made

it into the calendar; it is a festival of all Christians who ever lived, live, and will live, forgotten or not. The key to the content of this festival is our liturgical language. Throughout the liturgy, we remember the Virgin Mother "with all the saints." Also, just before we pray the "Our Father," we finish the eucharistic memorial by remembering "all the saints," that is, the persons mentioned after the Spirit's invocation, from the forebears of God's people to "all men and all women." Furthermore, the eucharistic meal—"the holy things"—is offered to "the holy ones," the saints. I hope that no one understands the invitation to the eucharistic meal as addressed to the saints in heaven and to those, fewer, whom we have included in the calendar. The call is to all of us, those present, who participate in the liturgy. I also hope that no one construes oneself as worthier of the eucharistic meal than the next-door neighbour, and that no one entertains the delusion that it is for the healthy and worthy, instead of the sick and the fallen. The call is to us, saints by grace, sinners in deed, all in need of communion, fellowship, and healing. Liturgy's "saints" are the New Testament "saints," all of us, God's people. In the light of the above, All Saints celebrates us and our togetherness in Christ. May we live accordingly!

Random Thoughts

We eat death and in so doing we make death alive within us, says Saint Maximus (*Difficulty* 10.28). It took me awhile to understand that he meant it literally. It's so obvious: everything we eat is dead, killed for us to feed upon. A world slaughtered for our sake—animals, plants, and minerals alike—so that we can die eating death, so that we become what we eat. And since we cannot live forever by eating death, we cannot continue to eat. Plato's Socrates advised philosophers to practice remembrance of death in order to find wisdom for life. Better still, Saint Clement of Alexandria encouraged the seekers of wisdom to "exercise living" (*Stromateis* 5.14.106), the opposite of our death. But how is that exercise done, one might ask? One way is by changing priorities. As the Lord teaches, "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). This is a way of saying that we must practice moderation. Rather than prioritise eating, we seek food in the Lord's wisdom, pondering it day and night (Psalm 1:2). Thus do we train for the day when we are able to stop eating. On that day, we shall breathe in Christ's Holy Spirit, who permeates everything around us.

*

It seems to me that we all take too seriously what we say about God; we entrust our theologies with the task of butchering God in order to fit our bill, our quest for clear and distinct ideas. I am not thinking of what and how God talks to us; I'm thinking of human speech. Apophatic theology

teaches that our thoughts and words won't do. After all, God is not like us (Isaiah 55:8). Why, then, do we take our words so seriously, killing one another for semantics?

*

Sometimes it's good to take a break from our daily rhythms, to take a breath. We could reflect upon God's mercy. Why not. On such an occasion, for example we could exercise remembrance of God's mercy and providence. Indeed, we should thank for all the blessings bestowed upon us, whether known or unknown, as our liturgy teaches. And if one needs a pretext to take a break, to take a breath, and to reflect, here's one. It's the first day of October. According to the *Life of Saint Andrew the Fool for Christ* (tenth century), once, the Lady Birth-giver of God (*Theotokos*) revealed herself to him extending a protective veil over the people gathered at Blachernae, in Constantinople. This vision shows that God's providence works in many ways, directly and indirectly; in this case, it worked through the Lady's protection. On a day like this, we revere her kindness—and we gratefully acknowledge God's providence at work in our lives, directly and indirectly, knowingly and unknowingly.

*

While the Lady's protective veil is somewhat more obvious for certain believers, we find signs of divine providence all around us. Christians believe that all things point towards profound layers of reality. Accordingly, they see everywhere signs of the ongoing interaction between the divine activity and the cosmic energies. Our own existence and the universe's are outcomes of this interaction. For it is within God that we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). All that occurs around us in the natural world—I do not talk about evil here—is the outcome of this fundamental synergy. All is providence. Providence is where the Spirit is (Psalm 103:27–30 LXX), and the Spirit is everywhere, filling all things and supporting their workings. Here is an example. The fact

that the Earth has a magnetosphere which protects us from harmful cosmic radiations—an equivalent of the Lady's veil, if you wish—is no random occurrence for us. Providence is at work throughout all the layers of the natural world. Other planets within our solar system do not have it; nor do they shelter life. Believe what you will. But beware not to find yourselves in the situation which Kazantzakis describes along these lines: a worm was sleeping in the heart of God as though within an apple, dreaming that God existed not.

*

Reading *The Philokalia* on your own is dangerous, they say. Well, yes. But not because you cannot escape going with the fairies—believing that you're an accomplished saint, a bodily angel, an earthly god, and a luminary for the ignorant. At least this is the usual refrain of many *philokalic* experts. They might be right at times. I met people who—while still very young—after having grown long beards and put on pale faces already soared above the rest of us, mere mortals. Angelic beings over night. But, no. Reading *The Philokalia* on your own is dangerous because you will find so much about yourself, that your twisted, congratulatory mirror will explode in a thousand pieces. It's dangerous because, finding out who you really are, you will become unable to maintain the image of yourself you currently project. You will be naked, with nowhere to hide. It's dangerous because *The Philokalia* forces you to be who you are—masks, and beards, and headscarves down. So, don't read it it if you love the image of your awesome self. Sleep well.

*

Reading *The Philokalia* is also dangerous for the institutional church. The church might hear bad news about itself and its inadequacies. Its materialistic outlook, for example. For the church is industry. The church is a bank. The church invests. The church earns money and power. The church has property. *The Philokalia* teaches that none of this pertains to Christ's church, God's city. Or, again, think of the church's worldly—all

too worldly behaviour—because of which people abandon Christ's way. No wonder that the church shelves *The Philokalia* together with other prophetic writings of no concern to it. Business as usual.

*

Perceptions and opinions. They differ because we differ. It does not matter how much we differ intellectually or socially. What matters is that we differ existentially. And we differ existentially because of our lifestyle choices. As materialism conditions our perceptions and opinions, so does spiritualism too. One leads to soulless bodies, the other to disembodied spirits. Advancement in the spiritual life sharpens our perceptiveness, but regress blunts it. As a result, opinions differ and—whether we like it or not—they do not matter equally. Not when it is about big things, the big questions of life. Sometimes not even for small things. The sharp discernment of a spiritually advanced person finds no match at the foothills of the mountain, there, where greasy meats boil in the cauldron. Granted, the spiritually advanced person is not free of mistakes. Saint Seraphim of Sarov and Saint Silouan the Athonite repeatedly pointed out that even the saints can be wrong. But the spiritually advanced person has a better grasp of life than anyone else. Big mouths, "influencers," bloggers, clerical ranks, ecclesiastical attire, doctorates, money, power, and celebrity have no competence here. We must wake up from the illusion that the public opinion—the views of the powers to be, or the pearls of today's celebrities—matter. We must wake up before it's too late. Discernment matters, and it's impossible without spiritual progress.

*

The Sunday of Orthodoxy. A day of triumph and celebration. All the enemies have been defeated. Right. But what happens when, surreptitiously, the enemies are within? What happens when the voices of the weak in faith, of the spiritually untested, and of the immature become prevalent in the church? What happens when voices of this sort are

among the hierarchy, the clergy, and the monastics, not merely at the grassroots? Why, that's obvious: the church ceases to uphold the faith of the apostles, of the prophets, of the martyrs, of the fathers, and of the mothers—no matter how fervently and convincingly it will recite those words, as it does every year. The apostles, the prophets, the martyrs, the fathers, and the mothers of old did not fear the world; they engaged it in various ways. They had no fear; they had discernment. They were not weak in faith and ignorant and spiritually untested. Discernment taught them what was good and what evil in the world. They disposed of the bad apples and kept the good ones. The same do the apostles, the prophets, the martyrs, the fathers, and the mothers of all times and places, including our own. Only the weak, the ignorant, the immature, and the spiritually untested oppose the world wholesale. Only the weak, the ignorant, and the spiritually untested hunt down the apostles, the martyrs, the fathers, and the mothers of any time and place. *Quo vadis, ecclesia?*

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Let's consider the raging fires throughout Australia's east coast at the end of 2019 and in the early 2020, or any cataclysmic events anywhere in the world, for that matter. Most people sleep inside the apple, dreaming that the apple doesn't exist. But the apple is there, being gradually consumed, exhausted, wasted. I can understand why the people of disconnection—the offspring of modernity—might do as Kazantzakis' worm. It is who they are, people of disconnection. But the Orthodox? How can we do the same, combing our hair when the world is burning? We believe that we are traditional, and that Orthodox Christianity is a wisdom culture. But are we? Our tradition, our framework which determines our way of thinking and living, preaches global connectivity. "No man is an island." No thing is separate from other things. We do not preach disconnection. How we live affects not just the worm; it affects the apple, the world. I know Orthodox who—because the universe is so vast and overwhelming—have stopped believing that our presence matters and that our activities have environmental and cosmic consequences. I know

of Orthodox who claim that "coal is good" (so is greed too, I assume) and that our wasteful ways do not affect the earth. But Orthodoxy means to think correctly, in the parameters of our framework. All things are connected with all things. This is the wisdom of our framework. We are responsible for many things, including for our environmental impact. As Saint Paul teaches, "the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it" (Romans 8:20). Regardless of other factors at work in the universe, what we do causes cosmic ripples. We must stop thinking only of ourselves. We cannot cut the trees, pour concrete everywhere, and joyfully celebrate the Day of Creation. We must wake up. We must heed the readings of the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Ephesians 5:8–19; Luke 12:16–21). "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" We are in the very midst of all things. We are contributors to whatever happens in the world and to the world. We cannot point fingers elsewhere about the Australian tragedy or any other cataclysmic events anywhere in the world. As Orthodox, we are people of global connectivity, not of disconnection from everything else. Everything we do matters. We are connected with everything.

*

Every time I reflect upon the festival of the Virgin Lady's entry into the (state of) temple, I remember Saint Symeon the New Theologian's point that, through faith, we conceive God's Word in our hearts as the Virgin did (*The First Ethical Discourse* 10). The Lady's experience summarises what all believers must experience, that is, give birth to Christ mystically, or rather to their new, Christlike selves. Saint Mary's experience, therefore, is the criterion in the light of which we grasp our destiny. We contemplate her experience and we learn what we are meant to become, Christ-bearers, by giving birth to our new selves through faith, through our conversion. This gives a whole new meaning to tapping into the feminine side within each of us; that we must anyway do; however, we must

do it by interiorising the Lord's Mother's icon. And when that happens, namely, when we become virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) by giving birth to our new, Christlike selves, we must rethink the church, especially its androcentrism and misogyny. Until then, no wonder we are as we are. And we are as we are because we haven't given birth to our new selves yet. Then when? Maybe next year, if we don't forget again to reflect upon this festival and to revere the Lady whose life reveals our destiny.

*

I don't believe in the new year, the supposed perfect alignment of the starry sky. Another convention among many. I believe in divine providence. I live under the stars, of course, and I look up as often as possible. I rejoice at their tremendous sight—the next best thing since I can't fly closer—but I don't seek the comfort of some illusory foretelling of my life. My life, and yours, is in God's hands. "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

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Regardless of our current failures, especially our ignorance, the framework of tradition works. People can remember, people can recover, people can heal, people can progress in the here and now. Saints emerge from our ranks. No one needs to go through reincarnations. Christ, the life of the world, makes things work within our framework. What remains for us to do is take it seriously, as people and as church.

About the Author

Protopresbyter Dr Doru Costache is the founding director of the Australian Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Sydney, and a Senior Lecturer in patristic studies at St Cyril's Coptic Orthodox Theological College with the Sydney College of Divinity, Australia. He previously lectured in patristics at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College in Sydney (2005–2017). He also lectured in systematic theology for the Department of Orthodox Theology at the University of Bucharest (1995–2004).

He coauthored *Dreams, Virtue and Divine Knowledge in Early Christian Egypt* (2019), *Sfinții Părinți despre Originile și Destinul Cosmosului și Omului* (2003), *Știință și Teologie: Preliminarii pentru Dialog* (2001), and *Introducere în Dogmatica Ortodoxă* (1997). He authored *Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Church: The Sunday Cycle* (2018) and *The Festal Cycle* (2019). He coedited *Well-being, Personal Wholeness and the Social Fabric* (2017), *John Chrysostom: Past, Present, Future* (2017), *Alexandrian Legacy: A Critical Appraisal* (2015), *Cappadocian Legacy: A Critical Appraisal* (2013), and *Noua Reprezentare a Lumii: Studii Interdisciplinare*, vols 1–4 (2002, 2004, 2005).

He has more than twenty years of experience in ordained ministry. He currently ministers to Saint Gregory the Theologian's Orthodox Mission on Sydney's North.

https://scd.academia.edu/DoruCostache
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Doru_Costache
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These sets of reflections on Orthodox ecclesial and spiritual life come at the reader like an arrow on fire. . . This is because they are like the fiery apophthegms of a spiritual father—often meant to shake us up; to make us think beyond our clichés; to shock us out of complacency. . . This is not a book to read over lightly: rather a set of prophetic charges (sometimes explosive charges!) that ask of their readers to open not only their minds to what they are saying, but even their hearts to what the Holy Spirit may be saying through them.
— Archpriest Professor John A. McGuckin

Doru Costache is Senior Lecturer in Patristic Studies at St Cyril's Coptic Orthodox Theological College at the Sydney College of Divinity, Australia. He is also an Honorary Associate of Department of Studies in Religion, the University of Sydney. He is the founding director of the Australian Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies. Coauthor of *Dreams, Virtue and Divine Knowledge in Early Christian Egypt* (2019). Author of *Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Church: The Sunday Cycle* (2018) and *The Festal Cycle* (2019).

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