

Prayer with the Non-Orthodox?

A Question Pertinent to our Time

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When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared on them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

- *The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2:1-4*

The ecumenical movement has brought about much good. This cannot be denied. Many people have been exposed to the Orthodox Faith who would otherwise never have encountered the pearl of great price that is the Truth of Christ. Many of them have scorned us, while others have remained indifferent. Yet others have sought to incorporate part of what they have found in Orthodoxy into their own confessions. While we must not hastily rejoice in such blending of traditions, we must remain steadfast in our trust of God's faithfulness and that the life-giving Trinity will allow this seed to grow and bear fruit. Others have searched the depths of their hearts and allowed themselves to answer the call to become one in Christ's Body, the Church, for which God be praised.

However, at what price comes this good? As the reader will be aware, the word *ecumenism* has different shades of meaning and does not solely refer to conversations with our friends of other confessions for the purposes of mutual understanding – itself no bad thing. It also bears connotations that are much more sinister, though subtly so. *Ecumenism* can also refer to the acceptance of beliefs and practices as Orthodox that are actually contrary to the Orthodox Christian Faith. In being less than careful in our presentation of the Faith to others, do we who have been incorporated into the Body of Christ and who, through the laver of new birth, have received the adoption of sons by God's grace, run the risk of selling our own birthright for a mess of pottage? Those of our Orthodox brothers and sisters who are heavily involved in the ecumenical movement will tell us that this is not the case but one has to wonder at some of the things that we see. This short article is intended to deal with one element of

our Tradition: namely, the matter of prayer, and with whom it can be offered in the Orthodox understanding of Church.

One positive result of the ecumenical movement is that many of our friends who are not Orthodox have developed a better understanding of our practice of sharing the Mysteries only among the Orthodox. More and more, they realise that we cannot, because of what we understand to be a proper Christian ecclesiology, recognise those outside of Orthodoxy as being part of the Church, because of what we understand Christ's Church to be; and that we see the Mysteries – especially Baptism and the Eucharist – as being intrinsically bound to the life of the Church. However, if we act with love and generosity, they should also realise that we do not, (and indeed would not wish to), deny their sincerity in striving to live according to what God would have us all be, even though we cannot make Eucharist with them because of the separation that exists between us. They realise that our actions are not born of smugness or pride but out of faithfulness to Christ and love for his people, and our beliefs about the nature of the Church. Another positive result of the ecumenical movement is that we who are Orthodox are forced to challenge and uproot any pride that may be lurking in our hearts as we strive to explain this to our families, friends, and acquaintances without causing undue offence. Our understanding of the nature of the Church as a microcosm of the consubstantial and undivided Trinity – not embracing fragmentation, discord, and division within itself - is one that is difficult for many to swallow, yet it is one that we believe to be true, and it is imperative that we harbour no sense of superiority when sharing the Faith with others, recognising that it is only by God's grace that we are a part of this Church.

Unfortunately, this good has often been undone by the idea propagated by the ecumenical movement that, whatever separates us, we can take comfort in the fact that we can at least pray together. This is an example of the false ecumenism that subtly undermines the Christianity that we have received from those before us, by deceptively presenting itself as something positive. To the Orthodox mind, prayer, like the entire mystical life in Christ, is shared among those who are one in Christ through Baptism. Sadly, even some Orthodox people are heard to say things such as, 'I do not receive communion when I go to a church that isn't Orthodox but I'm glad that I can pray with them.' The very fact that sincere Orthodox Christians can say such things and quite honestly not see that this is contradictory to Orthodoxy is itself evidence that the ecumenical movement has had the effect of diluting Orthodoxy in the minds and hearts of at least some Orthodox people, and this is no small matter, for it is not just our own deification

that is stunted. What are we presenting to our non-Orthodox and non-Christian friends when we ourselves hold to a version of Orthodox Christianity that is impoverished and incoherent, and unfaithful to the nature of the Church, which is Christ's Body?

The fact of the matter is that prayer with those who are not Orthodox is no different from sacramental Communion with those who are not Orthodox, or recognition of those outside of Orthodoxy as being one with the Church despite their separation from us in ecclesiastical fact and in matters of faith and worship. These things are all contradictory to Orthodoxy for they all deny the unity of the Church, suggesting that the Trinity is divided. It is precisely these ideas and practices based thereon which fall under the anathema against the heresy of Ecumenism¹, which has been pronounced in our hierarchical services² every year on the Sunday of Orthodoxy since its affirmation in 1983. The canons are quite clear on this matter:

One must not join in prayer with heretics or schismatics.

- *Laodicia XXXIII*

Let any Bishop, or Presbyter, or deacon that merely joins in prayer with heretics be suspended, but if he has permitted them to perform any service as Clergymen, let him be deposed.

- *Canon XLV of the Holy Apostles*

Concerning the fact that those belonging to the Church must not be allowed to go visiting the cemeteries or the so called martyria of any heretics, for the purpose of prayer or of cure, but, on the contrary, those who do so, if they be among the faithful, shall be excluded from communion for a time until they repent and confess their having made a mistake, when they may be readmitted to communion.

- *Laodicia IX*

If any clergyman or layman enter a synagogue of Jews or of heretics to pray, let him be both deposed and excommunicated.

- *Canon LXV of the Holy Apostles*

These words may sound harsh to our 21st-century ears but our ears ought to be primarily Orthodox and not led by the spirit of the age of ecumenism.

To further complicate matters, it is not unheard of for some Orthodox people to argue that these canons do not apply to joint prayer with non-Orthodox Christians today, as the term *heretic* cannot properly be applied to them. Yes, it is true that in some – perhaps even most – cases, our friends of other confessions cannot properly be called heretics. A heretic is one who, claiming to be a

Christian and understanding the Christian Faith, chooses to adopt and profess a distortion of that Faith as though it were Christianity, thereby setting his own will and reasoning above the Body of Christ. Most people in non-Orthodox churches today are not guilty of this but have simply inherited such distortions. Their forbears may indeed have been heretics but those today are simply professing what they have always known, and have themselves made no conscious decision to depart from the true Faith. It would be wrong of us to attribute to them the sort of pride of which they have not been guilty. Therefore, they are properly referred to as *heterodox*, which simply means “other believing” or “other worshipping”³. They confess beliefs other than those which are Orthodox and they conduct their lives and worship according to those beliefs. Therefore, it can be reasonably argued that the word *heretic* does not apply to them.

However, none of that is of any relevance to the matter at hand. These canons are not condemnatory – they do not accuse our heterodox friends of being wicked heretics – for that is not their purpose. No, the purpose of these canons is to clarify that the Orthodox may not pray with those who are separated from us because of the Christian understanding of communal prayer. Whether or not those who are separated are personally responsible for that separation is not relevant here. The point is that the separation is real and that we do not pray with those who are not of one heart and one mind with us, who do not share in our Baptism and our Faith, and our sonship as children of the same heavenly Father. To do so would be to give the false impression that the Church sanctions these separations, and that the incorrect beliefs and manner of living that exist in these traditions are in keeping with the life in Christ, which would be dishonest and extremely unfair to our non-Orthodox friends, not to mention a betrayal of the blood of the Martyrs who have suffered and died for the Faith.

Therefore, when the Orthodox heart, having seen past the initial discomfort caused by the strong wording of the canons, examines why these canons are in place and the meaning behind them, it cannot help but realise that, far from being simply a consolatory action engaged in by those who cannot share in anything more due to their divisions, communal prayer is in fact an action of the Church – an action of those who are of one Faith and are united in a sacramental bond of fellowship brought about by their oneness in Christ, with a common Father, through their common Baptism. It is a sign and outworking of communion in Christ.

This is certainly what we find in Scripture. The opening quotation of this article tells us of the disciples at Whitsun, who had gathered "with one accord". In the book of Daniel, when Ananias, Azarias, and Misael were cast into the fire at the command of King Nebuchadnezzar, and sang their hymn of praise to God, they were said to sing "as if with one mouth"⁴. St Paul, in his epistle to the church at Rome, has this to say:

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- *St Paul to the Romans 6:5-6*

He exhorts the faithful of the church at Philippi to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel"⁵. Time and time again, we see throughout the Scriptures that it is simply assumed that prayer and worship are offered by those of one mind, one heart, one faith, and not by those who are divided and fragmented by schism and heresy.

This Scriptural understanding of prayer and worship permeates the Tradition of the Orthodox Church from the beginning to the present.

Tertullian, writing in the late second or early third century AD, introduces his treatise, *On Prayer*, with a chapter explaining Christian prayer, and that the Lord's Prayer is the new prayer of the New Covenant, taught by Christ Himself, and that all forms of prayer before this are fulfilled in the Lord's Prayer, which is the prayer of those who are made God's children through their faith and sonship in Him. He calls it a summary of the Gospel. All of the prayer of the Christian faithful stems from the Lord's Prayer.

He goes on to say:

It begins with bearing witness to God and with the reward of faith when we say: "Father, You Who are in the heavens."

For we are praying to God and confessing the faith of which this mode of address is an indication. It is written: "To those who believe in Him, He gave power to be called children of God" (John 1:12). For that matter the Lord most frequently proclaimed to us that God is Father, indeed, He also demanded that we should call nobody "father" on earth, except Him Whom we have in heaven (Matthew 23:9). Therefore, when we pray in this way, we are being obedient to that direction; happy are they who acknowledge the Father! It is on these grounds that Israel is reproached, because the Spirit calls heaven and earth to bear witness as He says: "I have begotten sons and they have not acknowledged me" (Is 1:2).

However, when we say "Father" we are also naming God in a form of address which demonstrates both devotion and power. Moreover, the Son is invoked in the Father, for He says: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Nor is the mother, the Church, neglected, since the mother is found within the Father and the Son, for the name of Father and Son find their meaning in her. Therefore, under one term and with one name we honour God along with those who are his, both recalling God's commandment and scorning those who have forgotten the Father.

- Tertullian, "On Prayer" chapter II

He clearly associates oneness in the Father with oneness in the Church. St Cyprian makes this even more explicit in his treatise, *On the Lord's Prayer*, which was intended as instruction to catechumens, and in which he links the sonship and the ability to truly call upon God as Father directly to the renewal, regeneration, and adoption of Baptism, (chapter IX), and gives this as the reason for the practice of the newly-baptised saying the Lord's Prayer immediately after rising from the water, (which practice, unfortunately, seems to have fallen into disuse in our present-day baptismal liturgies).

In chapter ten, he writes:

Dearest brothers, we should turn our minds and understand not only that we call Him "Father, Who is in heaven," but that we add to this and say: "Our Father," that is of those who believe, of those who have begun to be children of God, sanctified through Him and restored by a birth of spiritual grace...

He dedicates three chapters to this point, emphasising that those who have "abandoned Him", (speaking specifically at this point about those of the Jewish confession), cease to have Him as their Father. In chapter 11, he exhorts his catechumens not to fall away, and that none would have dared use this name (Father) in prayer unless God Himself had authorised us to do so.

Immediately prior to this point, and laying the foundation for it, he emphasises in chapter eight unity in the God of peace and concord as pre-requisite for common prayer. He says that prayer is not individual, and that if we pray by ourselves, we pray only for ourselves. He stresses that we pray to *Our* Father, and not to *My* Father, and that we ask for *our* daily bread, and so forth. Picking up on the point made earlier about prayer being offered by those of one faith, and offering more scriptural support for this, St Cyprian writes:

The three youths shut up in the furnace of fire observed this law of prayer by joining together in harmony of prayer and agreement of spirit. The reliability of divine Scriptures declares this; and while it teaches the manner in which they prayed, it gives an example which we should imitate in our prayers, inasmuch as we are able to be like them. It says: "Then those three sang as from one mouth and blessed the Lord" (Daniel 3:51). They were speaking as from one mouth and, though Christ had yet to teach them to pray, their speech as they prayed was availing and efficacious because a peaceable and simple and spiritual prayer was pleasing to God.

We find that the apostles, together with the disciples, prayed in this manner after the Lord's ascension. It says: "All were persevering with one mind in their prayer with the women and with Mary who was the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). They persevered in prayer, being of one mind in their prayer, as their constancy and unanimity together showed that God, "Who causes persons to dwell in a house with one mind" (Psalm 67:7), does not admit anyone to the divine and eternal home apart from those whose prayer is of one mind.

Not only is this understanding an ancient one but it is also one that has never been rejected by the Church. Throughout the centuries, the Church has demonstrated this understanding of prayer in the way she worships God, both in terms of explicit statements and actions in the Liturgy and in more subtle arrangements of the structure of the Liturgy.

Bearing in mind the teaching of Tertullian and St Cyprian that the Lord's Prayer is the basis of Christian common prayer, and that such prayer is offered by those who are in union with each other in common faith and as those who have received the adoption as sons of a common Father, it would certainly explain the location of the Lord's Prayer in the Orthodox Eucharistic rites of both east and west. It falls between the Anaphora, (the heart of the corporate worship of God by his people at which, traditionally, those present would be those baptised into oneness with Christ and each other), and the Communion, (demonstrating and feeding that unity and communion with each other and God). Indeed, in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, the Anaphora itself ends with the words, "...and grant unto us that with one mouth and one heart we may glorify and hymn thy most-honourable and majestic Name..."⁶.

Also, Tertullian's linking of Christian prayer to Baptism and St Cyprian's elucidation of it for the sake of the catechumens both seem to fit in with the Church's liturgical practice surrounding catechumens. While the deacon is leading the litany for the catechumens, the priest says the following prayer:

O Lord our God, Who dwellest on high and lookest down on things that are lowly, Who unto the human race hast sent forth salvation, thine Only-Begotten Son and God, our Lord Jesus Christ: look upon thy servants, the catechumens, who have bowed their necks before Thee, and vouchsafe unto them at a seasonable time the laver of regeneration, the remission of sins, and the garment of incorruption; **unite them to thy Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and number them among thy chosen flock, that they also with us may glorify thy most honourable and majestic Name:** of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.⁷

In this prayer, the priest asks that the catechumens may be made one with the faithful **in order that** they may glorify God along with the faithful. It expresses a direct link between oneness in Christ through Baptism and common faith on the one hand, and the common offering of prayer and worship to God on the other.

Immediately after this, the catechumens are dismissed from the gathering, for the faithful are about to make Eucharist. The deacon says:

As many as are catechumens, depart; catechumens, depart; as many as are catechumens, depart; let none of the catechumens remain.⁸

This is even more explicit in the Liturgy of St James:

Let none of the catechumens, let none of the uninitiated, let none of those who are not able to join with us in prayer remain.⁹

If followed strictly, with no other factors taken into account, this would seem to require that all those who are not baptised into the Orthodox Church should leave at this point for they cannot offer the Eucharist with the Church of which they are not part, for to join in Christian prayer with the Church is to claim God as Father, and "He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his Mother."¹⁰ However, such a legalistic reading of the canons is not the Orthodox way. General practice today is that, visitors, who may be unaccustomed to the theology of the Orthodox Church and may be confused or offended by the dismissal, are customarily permitted to stay and observe. Catechumens, however, have already committed themselves to embrace the Orthodox Faith and should act in accordance with this. Therefore, as they are still not united with us in Baptism, there is no excuse for them to remain after this point except where strong pastoral reasons exist in particular cases. In our times, (and as further evidence of the negative influence of the ecumenical movement on the Church), there are some places where the catechumens are routinely encouraged to stay and participate fully, with the exception of not receiving Communion. It is difficult to determine what effect this has on the

catechumens' understanding of the nature of the communion that is the Church and their place in relation to it but it does seem more prudent to maintain the traditional practice.

Now, where does all of this leave us who are in the west, in lands which have lost most of their Orthodox heritage of a thousand years ago, or indeed lands which may never have been Orthodox? We are once again in a missionary situation and our practice must reflect this. The canons of the Church are not hard and fast rules that must be strictly followed in every circumstance but rather exist for the maintenance of the good order of the Church, for the salvation of souls. They are not secular laws, designed to cover every single eventuality and they must be applied more strictly or more leniently according to the particular needs of those to whom the Church is ministering. We see this time and time again in the manner in which we fast, in the manner in which people are received into the Church, and in many other aspects of Church life – such a loving mother the Church is that we are met where we are and nurtured according to what God would have us be.

This does not mean that the canons are cast to the wind but that we must consider how we apply them. In a culture in which the Orthodox presence is minuscule, is it beneficial to require visitors and enquirers to always leave with the catechumens? These are not proud people who have consciously rejected the Orthodox Faith. Rather, these are good people who may be experiencing their first taste of Orthodoxy and may not understand the reasons for this. Of course, it is not intended as a means of hurting people but, confronted with what is to them an unfamiliar practice, without the sensitive explanation of the doctrine behind it, non-Orthodox people may indeed wrongly perceive it as a rejection of them. Is this the best way to bring souls to Christ? Is this reflective of the love that Christ showed? Surely, we should welcome them. On the other hand, in this culture where the Truth is little known, and where other Christian confessions are prevalent, is it prudent for us to behave as though those who subscribe to these other confessions are indeed one with the life of the Church? Are we not misleading them? I have certainly known people who have experienced this in some Orthodox churches, thinking it to be generous and loving, only to have their hearts broken when they have realised that they cannot receive Communion in Orthodox churches, and the reasons why this is. They have felt hurt and deceived by those very Orthodox people who at first seemed to be so warm to them and, in some cases, they have never returned. I am in no position to answer these questions and do not envy our priests who must weigh up all of these things, but they are matters that we must consider in our

missionary situation, and we must support our priests as they seek to best meet the needs of those people who are taking their first tentative steps towards the Fountain of Immortality, bearing always in mind the words of Blessed Seraphim of Platina:

...the royal path of true Orthodoxy today is a mean that lies between the extremes of ecumenism and reformism on the one side, and a "zeal not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2) on the other. True Orthodoxy does not go "in step with the times" on the one hand, nor does it make strictness or correctness or canonicity, (good in themselves), an excuse for pharisaic self-satisfaction, exclusivism, and distrust, on the other. This true Orthodox moderation is not to be confused with mere luke-warmness or indifference, or with any kind of compromise between political extremes. The spirit of "reform" is so much in the air today that anyone whose views are moulded by the "spirit of the times" will regard true Orthodox moderation as close to fanaticism, but anyone who looks at the question more deeply and applies the patristic standard will find the royal path to be far from any kind of extremism.

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I trust in Christ's promise that the gates of hell shall never prevail against the Church¹¹ but I do pray that those within the Church are not waylaid by the innocent appearance of the ecumenical movement which, while it does much good, can also do much damage through its subtle encouragement of the abandonment of element after element of our Holy Tradition.

All of what precedes is solely my own reading of the Scriptures, the fathers, the canons, and the Church's worship, in light of my limited experience of the Tradition of the Church, and carries no authority beyond that. However, it is presented here in the hope of conveying to those who read it – Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike – some understanding of the Orthodox practice of not joining in prayer with those who are not Orthodox and the dangers of either extreme of conservatism or liberalism. Any errors are my own and I ask the reader's forgiveness and prayers. This effort is intended to give those who are not Orthodox some insight into the doctrine that underpins the actions of their Orthodox friends who may be hesitant to accept their invitations to join them at church services and may alleviate any feelings of upset caused by this. It may also go some way to explaining the recent re-structuring of the worship format at gatherings of the World Council of Churches in light of the objections of Orthodox participants¹², which caused confusion to many people who, despite all sincerity of effort, could not understand the concerns. For Orthodox people, it is hoped that this may give some food for thought, and perhaps may form part of the basis for decisions about how to respond to invitations to attend others' churches, how much or how little to participate, if at all, and how to maintain

one's Orthodox integrity and see to one's own deification while not causing undue offence to family, friends, and acquaintances. The guidance of the spiritual father should always be sought, especially where sensitive events, such as weddings and funerals, are involved. Finally, may we always act out of love for Christ and each other, for the sake of our salvation and deification, and for the salvation of the world.

O Thou Who hast bestowed upon us these common and concordant prayers, and Who hast promised that when two or three are agreed in thy name Thou wouldst grant their requests: do Thou Thyself now fulfil the requests of thy servants to their profit, granting us in this present age the knowledge of thy Truth, and in that to come, life everlasting.

- from the Liturgy of St Basil

Sources, Acknowledgements, and Footnotes

1. *“Those who attack the Church of Christ by teaching that Christ’s Church is divided into so-called “branches” which differ in doctrine and way of life, or that the Church does not exist visibly, but will be formed in the future when all “branches” or sects or denominations, and even religions will be united into one body; and who do not distinguish the priesthood and mysteries of the Church from those of the heretics, but say that the baptism and eucharist of heretics is effectual for salvation; therefore, to those who knowingly have communion with these aforementioned heretics or who advocate, disseminate, or defend their new heresy of Ecumenism under the pretext of brotherly love or the supposed unification of separated Christians, Anathema!” – The anathema against ecumenism, added to the anathemas pronounced on the Sunday of Orthodoxy by the Synod of Bishops of the Russian church Abroad.*
2. That is to say, in parishes, monasteries, and missions of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia.
3. *Hetero* = “other”, *Doxia* = “practice of worship/faith”
4. Daniel 3:51
5. Philippians 1:27
6. *The Jordanville Prayer Book*, Holy Trinity Monastery. Jordanville, New York.
7. See 6.
8. See 6.
9. *The Order of the Divine Liturgy of the Holy and Glorious Apostle James, the Brother of God, and the First Hierarch of the Church of Jerusalem*, The Monastery of St Mark of Ephesus, New Jersey.
10. St Cyprian of Carthage *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*
11. Matthew 16:18
12. Until relatively recently, worship at gatherings of the World Council of Churches was structured according to the flawed understanding that joint prayer would be acceptable to all present, so there were joint services of blended traditions. Recent objections to this from Orthodox representatives, (not to mention the complete withdrawal of two local Orthodox churches), has led to a restructuring, allowing the current arrangement to continue alongside an additional provision for different member churches to conduct worship according to their own traditions, with others invited to be present. This seems to have gone some way to easing the burden on those Orthodox representatives who could not in conscience fully participate under the previous structure which, while perhaps well-intentioned, was by its nature exclusive of some members.

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