

Prison visit report

The Grace in the Divine Liturgy and how to participate in it.
Why is there no intercommunion between Orthodox and other believers in Christ?

The concept of “Salvation” in the Orthodox Church is different.

Differences in Making the Sign of the Cross.

About being slaves, and being “compelled”

2-14-2018

I went to the _____ unit with George Michael. We have not been together doing prison ministry for quite a while, and was good to be back in the saddle. Wednesday was a non-liturgy day because it is the week before Great Lent begins. I could have served the liturgy because I've done that before, since one must be flexible in prison ministry, but I decided to not serve liturgy, mostly because I'm extremely tired. The tiredness is not physical.

My intention was to tell them about the prayer of St. Ephrem and a little bit about fasting and about the goals of great Lent, and also if we had time to talk, about the book “The Field” which I've given to them. Pretty much, none of that happened. This is not a great surprise. Prison visits seem to have a mind of their own. Things only go the way I expect when I serve the liturgy, and even that liturgy is not usually the way I expect it to be.

There's a bit of a conflict in my prison ministry. I believe that serving the liturgy is critical, because there is great grace that God visits us with during the liturgy. I know that most of them don't understand this and don't feel it but I know it's present. They would prefer that I would talk to them about whatever they want to talk about. That is certainly easier to do, because all I need to do is show up, and I have enough experience and enough background knowledge that pretty much anything they asked me we can talk about and I don't feel out of my element. But, since I sit in the big chair, I have to make the pastoral decisions. Right now, I think the decision about what to do is being done by default, because I'm so tired. I think during great Lent I won't serve the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy even though I've done it before. It's quite a complicated liturgy, and I have to sing quite a bit and they are learning the liturgy but the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy is not well known to them.

Great Lent is coming; it's always very busy. This is my most different year ever. It is a year that did not begin in January, or September (the beginning of the church year for Orthodox, is in September). For me the year began June 11. It has been a very long year, with many things, bad and good, and it has led me to many places that I know I should be, but it is been exhausting.

I always ask them if they have any questions, and they generally do. I try to write down the things we talk about, because it always seems that they say something and I say something that I would like to save. The following is a commentary based upon the discussions we had. It does not cover all things we talked about, only the things that I had the presence of mind to write down. I am blaming my secretary for the topics that I have missed.

In the prison environment it is pretty much “ecumenism on steroids”. Most people have never heard of Orthodoxy, and the ones that have think that we are equivalent to the Roman Catholics. The question came up: **“Why don’t we have inter-communion?”**

Some of the Roman Catholic deacons that come are very friendly but they certainly don’t see any difference between Roman Catholics and Orthodox, and they often offer communion to my fellows. I only have two days a month with them and not even that (because of lockdowns and parish obligations and sometimes even diocesan travel obligations), so it’s very hard to impress upon them all the teachings of the Orthodox faith from A to Z. I always concentrate on what I think are the most important things, which is love of God, love of neighbor, struggle in prayer, prayer for others, understanding the Scriptures, and other things. It is very hard to get all the dogma in. I have talked about intercommunion before, but it is hard to learn things unless they are repeated.

One of my men was talking to a Roman Catholic deacon and said that I had not been able to come for a while – probably because they were locked down and because I had some travel that I was required to do – and that he normally has communion once a month but hadn’t had it for a while. So, this fine accommodating man who means well, said I will give you communion, and right then and there he took out a wafer and gave it to him.

That is one of the reasons why we don’t have intercommunion. We have a wholly different attitude about worship and about the Eucharist and about salvation. Regarding the Eucharist, of course, there are some that believe as we do – that it is the body and blood of Christ – however, also, for us it is the very center of our worship and involves worship. It is not a casual thing. It’s pretty much impossible for us to imagine standing in a hallway or ducking into a room and getting communion quickly. We believe that taking the Holy Mysteries is a completely holistic experience. It not only involves the body, but also the soul and also, we prepare for it, we partake of it in worship, and we try to live according to the power of the holy mysteries in us after we partake of it.

I also explained that the whole idea of Salvation is different in the Orthodox Church. It is the same word, but a much different meaning. The Roman Catholics and most Protestants believe in salvation as basically being saved from God’s wrath. They believe that God is completely holy and cannot tolerate any sin in His presence. The first statement is of course true, but the second is not. We are still alive, and evil men have lived long lives, and God is everywhere so He will certainly tolerate sin in His presence. The one who cannot tolerate something in God’s presence is us. Our sin makes us ashamed, and we cannot bear to be in the presence of God because of His holiness. This is a terrible problem that was solved by the incarnation, and our reaction to it. The way we understand the solution is not the same as the typical Roman Catholic and Protestant understanding, given below.

According to the relatively new doctrine, called by some the “substitutionary atonement”, since we are sinful, and He is infinitely good, there must be an infinite sacrifice so that He will tolerate us and we will be saved. Jesus Christ became a man so that he could take on the infinite punishment that was required by sin, and then God would tolerate our presence since we would be forgiven and holy.

This is not what Orthodox Christians think. God loves us and has loved us and will love us, whether we love Him or not. He never changes his mind. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross did not change God’s mind. That sacrifice, of a perfect man without sin dying the death that sin inevitably requires, caused us to be able to change our minds, and the strength to carry through on our resolve. Through baptism, we partake of the sacrifice of Jesus

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Christ on the cross, and we give ourselves over to Him, and we begin the path of perfection. God does not require our perfection in order for Him to accept us. He does not make a decree that we are perfect. He gives us grace, so that through struggle we can become perfected. This grace is especially apparent in baptism, but of course, God's grace is always present for all men whether they be believers or not believers. Baptism changes us so that we can take in His grace and keep Him in our hearts. The apostle Paul characterizes this change as becoming a "new creature".

From the beginning Christians considered worship to be something possible only with people that are of the *same mind*. That would mean that we believe the same dogmas concerning God, and that we are united in spirit with one another. On one level of course, we are united in spirit with all mankind, because all men are made in the image of God. That union is not adequate for us to be able to partake of the Holy Mysteries together. Only those that are grafted to the vine, and are part of the body of Christ can partake of the mysteries together. In our world today, this opinion would be lampooned as being bigoted or close minded or whatever else people want to say about things that they don't agree with. It is none of those things. It is just believing God, and obeying the things He tells us to do.

I mentioned that we don't have intercommunion with Protestants because they have a different view of worship that is even more different than the Roman Catholics. We should never question anyone's resolve, or sincerity, or goodness. We should know what Orthodox worship should be and what it should not be. It is not an intellectual exercise, is not even a time primarily for worshipping God, and singing songs and praising Him. It is not a time to be taught, or to be as some people say fed, or to fellowship with one another. All those things can occur but the primary reason for worship in the Divine liturgy is to meet God and to be in His presence and to be united with Him.

In this world, there are two main ways that we can meet God and be in his presence and be united with Him. The primary way is the Divine liturgy. Another way, which the Divine liturgy assists, is when a person, through struggle to follow the commandments and prayer of the heart, is united to God when he prays. The primary prayer is usually the Jesus prayer.

This second way is very difficult to obtain, and is not obtained outside of the life of the church, which includes her worship, doctrine, and traditions and practices. Even though we poor ones may pray poorly and not be able to unite our hearts to God in our personal prayer, it is incumbent upon us to *try* to do this, and we must try to do this during the liturgy. The Divine liturgy is called the "work of the people", and it indeed is work. The primary work is not singing, or serving, or tending the censer, or even standing before the altar and intoning the litanies. The primary work, which all should partake in, is to pray as much as possible with our hearts and to try to unite them to God.

This, *by the way* is what true participation in the liturgy is. In our day there is this idea that participation in the liturgy must mean that everybody can thing or everybody has some role to play. Of course, there must be singers, and servers, but everyone must participate in the liturgy by offering their heart to God and praying intensely as the service is going on.

When we begin the liturgy, we say: **“Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, both now and ever and unto the ages of ages, amen”**. This is not symbolic for us: it is actual. In a prison environment, it certainly doesn't feel like the Kingdom. Sometimes I'm in a room that is beastly hot, and fans are running making a terrible racket, and somebody is singing in another room or I hear a loud bass guitar somewhere. However, our senses are not telling us the whole story. We believe we are in the Kingdom, and our Lord Jesus Christ told us that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. At no other time in our daily life are we more united to God than when we are praying with our hearts and receiving the holy Eucharist in the Divine liturgy.

Since our brothers, according to the brotherhood of man, do not agree with all of these things, we are not able to have intercommunion with them. We respect all men, and are friendly with all, but we cannot consider ourselves to be completely united to all.

I was us a question about the sign of the cross and why Roman Catholics and Orthodox did it in a different way. I answered that to the best of my knowledge it is not known why there is a difference in order, or when this difference happened. The Orthodox move their fingers from the head down to the belly and then to the right shoulder and last of all, to the left. The Roman Catholics go from the head to the belly and to the left shoulder and then to the right. I am not aware of any theological significance to this. I'm certain that some people tried to explain it in a theological way. The biggest theological difference in the way that the sign of the cross is made is that Orthodox hold their fingers in such a way that they are proclaiming the holy Trinity and the dual nature of Jesus Christ.

I also explained that the Old Believers, which are a group, originally only in Russia, that rejected some reforms of the prayer books, make the sign of the cross in an even more ancient way than other Russian Orthodox. The Russian Orthodox would hold their first two fingers with their thumb together signifying the Holy Trinity and their last two fingers are pressed down into their palm (symbolic of the earth), which reminds us of the dual nature of Christ and His incarnation. The Old Believers hold their fingers differently; what they do is they cross their thumb with their last two fingers, signifying the Holy Trinity and then they put their index finger and their ring finger in a configuration to spell the first and the last letter of Jesus Christ, in Greek. Those letters in Greek are and “I” and a “S”, that is and “iota” and a “Sigma”. There is no theological difference in the way the fingers are held; they mean the same thing.

I told them that I would like to create sort of the dictionary of Orthodox terms, because the same kind of questions come up often. As an example, I showed them my epetrachiel and told them that this is the garment that a priest wears over his neck, and it has seven crosses and fringe on the bottom, which reminds the priest of the souls that he is taking upon himself, to pray for and to counsel, to confess and even to stand with at the great judgment. George reminded us that the word “epitrachelion” and has the Greek word seven in it.

We also talked about the word diptych, which means list. It's not so important to know what this word means but it is definitely important to have a list of people to pray for. I harp on this all the time. In my experience, if we rely on our memory to do something it will be haphazard. We should pray for our family, our friends, our enemies, anybody who crosses our path, and we should pray every day. That is what a diptych is useful for.

We also talked about the word that is translated “servant” in the Scriptures. It actually is the Greek word which means “slave”. We should consider ourselves “slaves” of God. We are either slaves of God, or we are slaves of the evil one. There is not anything in between. Slavery to the evil one leads to more and more slavery and unhappiness and eventual spiritual death. Slavery to God leads to freedom. God created us to be free, and our slavery to Him is are voluntarily giving over our will to Him, because we are unable to care for ourselves, and He knows always what is best for us. We are awaiting that day when His words “you shall be free indeed” will indeed be actualized completely in our lives. The Christian conception of freedom is not that a person can do whatever they want, it is that they can always do good because they always have within their capacity the ability to do good and the desire to do it. This is a much different kind of freedom than the world aspires to.

In speaking about this very important idea, I told them about one of my favorite parables. It is the one about the “Great Supper”. After the king sent his slaves to bid people to come to the supper and they had turned him down and then he called others and his banquet hall still not full, he told his slaves to go out beyond the city throughout the countryside and to “**compel**” them to come in.

This “compelling” is *not* to make us do something against our will – far from it. It has been interpreted as such by people who did not understand it, such as John Calvin. What it really means is that a person who experiences the goodness of God will have within him an inner compulsion to do the good things of God. This compulsion is voluntary, and it is even more powerful than outward compulsion. I gave as an example a mother who has an infant. When the child cries early in the morning, even though she is tired, she will of course get up and take care of the child; she will comfort it and nurse it and hold it. It is unthinkable that she would remain in her bed while her child needs her. There is a compulsion within her that forces her to take care of her child, and that compulsion is love.

We talked about the Last Judgment and that the previous Sunday was the “Sunday of Last Judgment”. I told them that the sole criterion for the judgment is whether or not we love. Of course, this should not be taken as a way to be ecumenists and say as long as we love we can believe anything we want and do anything we want to do. If we love God, we would obey Him, which we would mean we would believe the things He teaches us and tells us to do. One of the things He teaches us is that the church is His body and that we are to be united to Him in the church. Love is always united with truth. The Scripture tells us God is love, and also tells us that He is Truth.

I suggested that Great Lent would be a period of time when we increase our prayer and fasting and struggle to love everyone around us. Prison is in many ways not different than life in the world; it is just more intense. There are many opportunities to love people who do not love you and who mistreat you or say things bad things about you or are unfair to you. There are many opportunities to have your heart be touched by seeing how broken other people are, and to be kind to them in some way, and certainly to pray for them.

That is all that I remember that we talked about. Memory is a funny thing. I know we talked about more things than that, but I didn’t always have the presence of mind to write them down.

I will see these men again in two weeks, and it will be during the fast. I hope to follow some sort of outline with them, and begin teaching them in earnest about the wonderful book by Bishop Ignatius Briachaninov called “The Field”.