

## UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

### 30: Lessons from History?

The Orthodox Church has, down the centuries, embraced peoples and cultures, baptising all that was found to be compatible with Christian witness and transforming warring nations into an Eastern Christian Commonwealth. It should be pointed out that, when successful, this transformation has been open-ended and generally characterised by an 'openness' to other traditions and a willingness to work with all people of good-will, not least Western Christians. This vision has both sustained the Orthodox Churches and proved a 'work in progress' but the unity of the Eastern Christian Commonwealth has never been a 'given'. Rather, Eastern Christian unity has been repeatedly challenged in all places and at all times by worldly or secular and political considerations. However, we should note that an abiding Orthodox concern with what might be called 'religious correctness' has invariably undermined Eastern Christian values of community and solidarity. To clarify what is meant by a specifically 'Eastern Christian' outlook it must be stressed that historically this did not denote a geographical or cultural unit but rather it was the self designation of communities that aspired to the ideals proclaimed at the Ecumenical Councils and whose Christian life was shaped and informed by the teachings of the Patristic writers (East and West).

Examples of 'good practice' or excellence amongst the Orthodox are many and varied. The history of the surviving monastic republics, notably Mount Athos but also Patmos and Mount Sinai, provide numerous examples of the Eastern Christian vision successfully applied. On Mount Athos, for instance, in every century from the foundation of the major monasteries onwards and even in the years of national rivalry and related upheavals (largely in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) we can look to the example of monastic communities of diverse origins (in nationality, ethnicity, culture, language and class) for inspiration. The collaboration of Greek, Romanian and Slavic elders in compiling, editing and translating the Philokalia and illuminating this project with commentaries and related works (valued to this day) preceded and outlived the nationalist controversies on Mount Athos. Incidentally, this project not only

enriched the Orthodox Church spiritually but also in terms of scholarship and culture while at the same time also projecting the lives and work of great saints to inspire us. These latter include St Paissy Velichkovsky (1722-94, from Ukraine), St Nikodemos of Naxos (1749-1809, from Greece), St Makarios Notaras (1731-1805, from Greece) and St Theophan the Recluse (1815-94, from Russia). Likewise, Orthodox missionaries of the troubled 19<sup>th</sup> century elevated the virtues of each and every community they encountered. Even the earlier St Kosmas Aitolos (martyred in 1779) may have promoted the use of Greek language and education across the Balkans but only as a medium for closer links and communication between neighbouring peoples.

Pan-Orthodox calendars celebrate saints from every country and era. Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Monastic centres and the shrines of saints have provided a focus for unity and brought together Christians of every background. Above all, pilgrimage has operated as a forum for reconciliation and common human concerns and Christian witness. In the Holy Land the Monastery of Mar Saba has provided a beacon of Eastern Christian unity, with particular significance for the Serbians. In Albania the shrine of St John-Vladimir (martyred in 1015) at Elbasan brought together pilgrims from across the Balkans, including Catholics and Muslims. Likewise, the shrine of St John the Russian (died in 1730) in Cappadocia was a focus for pilgrims of varied communities in the Near East and when relocated to Greece in the 1920s continued to draw Russians and others. The Soumela shrine of the Theotokos provides a similar example of a centre of pilgrimage, originally a focus for communities around the Black Sea but surviving destruction and relocation to Greece in the 1920s, and remaining a focus for Pontians, Georgians and others.

The chronicle of the return of Orthodoxy to Ruthenia (or Carpathian Rus) provides an illuminating example of the strengths of Orthodoxy in unity. Following the martyrdom of Joachim Vakarov and other returnees to Orthodoxy from Uniatism in 1903 the Churches of Serbia, Romania, Russia and Constantinople coordinated their work to support the persecuted Orthodox and returning Uniates of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The great

enlightener of Ruthenia, St Alexis Kabaliuk, was persecuted by the Austro-Hungarians up to the First World War, the Hungarians in the run up to the Second World War and the Soviets up to his death. He and his companions, including martyrs and confessors, were sustained spiritually by their faith and practically by the solidarity of Orthodox Churches across Eastern Europe. Interestingly, the 'returning Orthodox' of Ruthenia were unanimously encouraged to retain what was best in their local traditions, including practices shaped by centuries of Uniatism.

The ruined churches of Carthage, the 'lost' and largely forgotten cathedrals of Nubia (Sudan), the abandoned cave monasteries of Cappadocia and empty shrines of Pontus both beckon to us and call us to reflect on the inter-play of history and faith. Calamitous events have shattered Orthodox Christian civilizations and extinguished Churches and nations linked to the Orthodox East. The Russians survived the Mongol and Tatar invasions but the Orthodox Churches of Alania, Gothia and neighbouring countries are now scarcely remembered. 1204, 1453, 1917 and 1922 are amongst the dates that have proved cataclysmic for the Orthodox worldwide. It should be remembered that the Genocide of the Armenians in 1915, the October Revolution of 1917 and the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922 are calamities that are closely linked. This has proved the pattern over many centuries. Although we have faith in the survival of the Church, history has demonstrated that this is not a guarantee to the survival of the Church in every country. Unfortunately, we have also come to appreciate that when under attack on all fronts an individual Orthodox Church is not always able to prioritise mission, but this is not a reflection on either the moral calibre or maturity of that particular Christian community.

**Dimitri Brady**

*“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”*

George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Volume 1, 1905

The evidence for humans learning lessons from history in order to avoid repeating its mistakes is scant but this hardly excuses us from attending to the past even if the best we can hope for is a modest improvement in awareness and freedom of action for the future. However, one lesson from Church History that the Orthodox in particular have learned is that in the context of witnessing to the faith, persecution is a normal state of affairs. Continuous long drawn out persecution is exceptional. Even Rome’s nearly three century long war of attrition against the heinous atheistic Christian sect was not unrelieved in its savagery.

Nonetheless it is arguably true that the pre-Constantinian Church had a much more realistic expectation of suffering for the truth than is often encountered today, particularly in the west. The suffering church in more recent times has been tried in the flames of a post-Christian rejection of a strong existing indigenous tradition; I refer of course to Soviet Russia. In the Middle Ages Christians often persecuted fellow Christians. In religiously stable societies with an established Christian presence martyrdom became a conscious choice in the embrace of Christian monasticism.

I suppose this begs the question as to whether or not Orthodox Christianity ever flourishes unless it is tested in some way. God never becomes so vivid as when hard choices have to be made. Maybe the atrophy of Christianity in the west is in part due to the suffocation of ease. Perhaps Monty Python had it right in its surreal sketch of the “Spanish Inquisition.” The “comfy cushions” are what kill us eventually. Yet, it must be said that to seek martyrdom as a spiritual good is perverse. Rather we might say that when the Church is true to itself in the living out of the gospel and in certain contexts, martyrdom is both inevitable and necessary ... even desirable if the alternative is apostasy. For the Church to be true to itself there must be an absolute priority for Christ manifested as the way of the Cross, the Way of absolute, unconditional, sacrificial love.

This Way is no private journey into piety but rather a prophetic way of living that often directly challenges the powers and principalities of this world. There have been many examples of such living in the history of the Christian Church. Perhaps the most recently glorified saint who exemplified this prophetic witness was St. Maria of Paris who stood up to fascism in order to rescue the Jewish people in her care. What we learn from her life and countless predecessors is that the gospel is stronger than any human ideology no matter how brutal. It should encourage us to apply St. Paul's teaching to our own lives and experience:-

*"...what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...." Philippians 3:7-10*

There are more sobering lessons to be learned from history, however and these concern how churches die. Apart from the more obvious cases of churches that die from compromising the gospel there are also examples of churches that die from what can only be described as a failure of nerve. Strictly speaking this is also a denial of the gospel in that it represents a substitution of human expediency for confidence in God. However, this fatal compromise is essentially a sin rather than a heresy. We also have to face the fact that not a few churches have either declined or disappeared because they remained supine and ineffective in the face of tyranny or corruption. Sometimes churches have actively collaborated with rich and powerful forces in order to maintain their own earthbound and carnal interests. We might think here of the pre-Revolutionary churches in France and Russia in the modern era. Churches that have buckled in the face of monocultural oppression have also not lasted long. Racism and internecine strife have significantly wounded churches in Northern Ireland and

in the southern States of the US. There are also the more difficult cases of churches that have declined because the State has proven unequal to the task of repelling incursions of antagonistic forces, political and religious. The synergy of Church and State has something to commend it if the objective is to defend truly Christian values against external and, sometimes, internal threat.

Finally churches have shrunk and died when they have turned inward spiritually. Sometimes this has happened because pietism has been exalted as the purest form of Christianity. Invariably pietism leads to anti-intellectual obscurantism and the withdrawal of churches from engagement with the lives of ordinary people and wider societal concerns. At other times the inward retreat of pseudo-faith has been driven by a comfortable yet deadly religious myopia – the sort that substitutes cultural and ethnic self absorption for open ended ecclesial life in mission. The end result is the same; the emergence of ever new forms of gnostic, cultural or scholastic retreat from the world, a denial of the Church's mandate to preach the gospel to all creation and an imminent death sentence for any church, Orthodox or not. The writing is on the wall. Will we read it?

**Fr. Gregory Hallam**