

On Missing Church

Dom James (Deschene)

The fecundity of the Orthodox mind is nowhere more evident than in the rich variety of excuses and reasons it can invent for not attending Sunday Liturgy. After two decades of being Orthodox, I am still taken aback by those who find it seemingly easy to excuse their absence from Mass on Sundays or feasts, or from Saturday or feast-day Vespers.

Roman Catholicism in the last days of the pontificate of Pius XII - and this may come as a surprise to some "cradle" Orthodox or converts to Orthodoxy from a Protestant background - remarkably strict and observant about many things spiritual and religious. Quite apart from her heresies, the Roman church in those days imposed - and enforced - strict regulations on such things as fasting, abstinence, and of course church attendance.

No Roman Catholic in those days took lightly the requirement - for it was seen as a divinely ordained rule - to attend Mass on Sunday and certain feast days (known then as holydays of "obligation"). Certainly some catastrophes - earthquake, flood, plague - could suspend the obligation. It was understood too that some medical conditions might legitimately excuse one from church attendance. Such things as measles or contagious disease, an appendectomy, the loss of a limb, or total paralysis might convince a Roman Catholic mother to keep her ailing child at home. Certainly no lesser ailment - a serious cold, a headache, a sprained muscle, a broken ankle - merited any consideration at all. And any complaints of tiredness or general lassitude would make on her no impression whatsoever. It was a simple and absolute rule: you went to Mass unless you were absolutely prevented from going.

Nor did travel away from home, or vacations, make a whit of difference. Wherever one happened to be - whether in an unfamiliar metropolis or the boondocks of Maine, one sought out, at whatever inconvenience of time or distance, the nearest Roman church and got to Mass. In those days, of course, you had to do all this on Sunday morning since Roman Catholics did not then have Saturday evening Masses.

Now it is easy to criticize this as the product of western or Roman legalism, but the fact is it worked. No even moderately lukewarm Roman Catholic could stay

home from Mass without a massive sense of guilt at committing a mortal sin that had to be expunged by confession as soon as possible. The bottom line was that nearly all Roman Catholics would attend Mass on a Sunday morning, except for those in open defiance of their church or those lying, if only temporarily, on their putative deathbeds. In all of this, the hope was that one would be impressed by the seriousness of the obligation into seeing something of the awesome importance and spiritual reality of the liturgical mysteries.

Now for Orthodox people today, at least in parts of the United States, there is sometimes the legitimate problem that there is no easily available church to attend. Certainly members of the Russian Church Abroad, wishing to attend a Synod church, sometimes have to travel a good distance to do so. Others will attend whatever Orthodox church is available. Still others, of various jurisdictions, refuse to attend any church but that of their own jurisdiction - part of the bane of American jurisdictionalism. For those seeking a western-rite Orthodox liturgy, the difficulty can be even greater. The question must be asked: is it not better to attend an Orthodox liturgy in some church even outside one's jurisdiction, than not to attend at all?

While I do not propose to answer that question (merely to raise it), I do think the corrective for any laxity in Sunday attendance is best countered not by the imposing of a harrowing legalism such as existed in pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, but by holding a proper view of what Sunday Liturgy should mean for the Orthodox believer.

Not long ago I was on the scene when an Orthodox woman of my acquaintance (though not of my parish) described how she aggressively maintained Orthodox morality against some opinion of her neighbour of another denomination. Apparently, after settling her neighbour's hash, she ended with a resounding 'We're Orthodox - we don't do those things!' This is perhaps in itself only mildly disedifying, though the smugness (to say nothing of the accuracy) of that last taunt is a mite questionable and a tad pharisaical. But the point of the story lies in the fact, known to me (and undoubtedly to the neighbour), that this woman rarely darkens the door of any Orthodox church.

To be Orthodox means more than holding "right doctrine" - it means engaging in "right praise" - i.e., right worship. And it means doing this at the right times, i.e., when the Orthodox Church realises itself and becomes most itself and most visible - in its celebration of the Holy Eucharist, especially on Sundays, the day of Resurrection. To be absent from this occasion - this moment when the Orthodox

Church becomes most embodied, most visible, most alive - is in a real sense a failure to be truly Orthodox. It is by being part of the occasion at that time and in that place that we truly are (and are seen to be) Orthodox in the fullest sense of that word.

What truly Orthodox believer would ever easily or readily excuse himself from joining in this living Mystery? And how paltry, in the light of the radiance and glory of the divine Mysteries, are our shoddy excuses? 'The church is too far away.' 'I was tired from watching the late show.' 'We had company Saturday night and couldn't make it to Vespers.' 'I was invited out for Sunday dinner and would be late if I went to church.' 'We had to get an early start to get beach parking.' Hopefully, we all have the good sense to be ashamed when we fall back on such excuses.

Moreover, we owe it to our brothers and sisters in the faith to support their presence in church by our own presence. Especially in smaller congregations is the absence of an individual or family obvious and keenly felt. We know that - however small the congregation, however few the worshippers - the fullness of the Church is manifested wherever the Liturgy is celebrated. At that moment and in that place Orthodoxy lacks nothing. But it is equally true that, from a purely human perspective, the absence of some members of a parish family or community is always felt and always tends to undermine the joy of the Orthodox parish family gathering in its Father's house to celebrate our Saviour's victory over sin and death.

It is the nature of Christian joy to wish to share itself with others -- to awaken others to God's welcoming home in his Church. So we seek to proclaim the joy and truth of holy Orthodoxy to others and to invite them in. How sad it is then, when we do this, when we bring newcomers into God's house, to find that those long a part of God's family are missing from that joyous homecoming.

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