

The Russian Orthodox Church

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While “freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognized for all citizens” by the Constitution of the USSR, so is “freedom of religious worship”. And though this latter clause veils a considerable range of restrictions and deprivations, its positive side ought not to be ignored or underestimated.

An Anglican visitor to Russia once asked patriarch Aleksii for a definition of the Russian Orthodox Church. The answer – “A Church which celebrates the divine Liturgy” – disappointed him. No doubt he understood the remark to mean, “A Church which *only* celebrates the divine Liturgy”. Had he emphasised *celebrates* and even more, *divine*, he would have come closer to an understanding of the patriarch’s (and the Russian Church’s) attitude. For the new and enforced concentration on worship has once more revealed to Russian Christians that Liturgy can act as Jacob’s Ladder, can be a meeting place between heaven and earth, an area of life in which man communes with God.

Hence their willing acceptance of elaborate and (by Western standards) excessively lengthy services – services throughout which, often in crowded and under-ventilated churches, young and old alike will stand (and stand attentively, devoutly) for several hours on end. Abbreviation of the services is barely tolerated. On the contrary, as metropolitan Nikodim has remarked, “faithfulness to our ways of worship – in this lies our salvation”. For it is in the traditional forms that the Church’s teaching is most adequately expressed and (as the Old Believers once argued also) to tamper with any aspect of tradition could mean tampering with the Faith itself. In any case, however well motivated a reform might be, the simple Christians of Russia would immediately suspect it as a secular attempt to infiltrate and undermine Church life. The memory of the Living Church experiments (1920’s and 30’s) lingers on and prevents even the calendar from being reformed.

So the old ways are cherished and retained. The argument that new circumstances demand new forms of worship meets with little or no response. And yet the new circumstances have given the old forms a new significance and a new vitality. There can be few countries in Europe where such fervour – uninhibited, yet unhysterical – may be observed and shared.

This is not to say that the services are intellectually understood. The average Russian has neither the theological nor the linguistic training to

understand Byzantine formulae in Slavonic translation (and Slavonic remains the principal liturgical language to this day). But the letter is not the whole. And the image (*obraz*) of God is powerfully communicated by a synthesis of poetry, painting, drama and music which has served throughout the centuries as the medium through which Russians were converted and taught their faith.

It is a synthesis that makes its impact also on outsiders. For Soviet society and its institutions can offer no comparable calm and beauty – nor can they provide so easy and so unalloyed a contact with the Russian past (something that attracts a certain category of visitor).

No wonder, then, that the Church's rites and feasts – Easter above all – compete successfully with secular festivities: so much so, that the atheist authorities have made a determined attempt to combat the appeal of religious rites by instituting a variety of new secular rites and (as they are ambitiously termed) traditions. Some of these are concerned with the crisis points in human life, some with abstract concepts, others with seasons. In the latter group one finds even movable feasts, linked in close partnership with religious festivals – sure testimony to the latter's continuing appeal.

The Church has its twelve major feasts, as well as Easter, and a calendar replete with saints' days and red letter days. Some of these are celebrated nationally, others are patronal feasts with local application. Local feasts may affect a given rural area (and, complain the state authorities, disrupt production there for several days). Others may provide the focal point for distant pilgrimages. The summer festivals of St. Iov at Pochaev or of St. Sergi at Zagorsk, for example, will attract thousands (in the case of Zagorsk, hundreds of thousands) of pilgrims from all parts of the USSR.

Nor are pilgrimages limited to particular feasts or seasons. At the relics of St. Sergi, humble daily services are conducted – largely by the pilgrims – throughout the year, from dawn to dusk. Elsewhere, relics may not even be exposed for veneration and still attract the pilgrims. Thus, the Caves Monastery in Kiev is closed and the relics of the monastery's saints are exposed for scientific comment and ridicule. Yet there are pilgrims still, who make the rounds and cross themselves and venerate the relics surreptitiously. Holy springs, no less than icons, are held to mediate divine grace. The Russian Christian is often vividly aware that the material world was not merely the setting for the Incarnation: it has organically participated in it.

Sacraments, *materia sacra* and sacramental actions thus occupy an all-important place in the devotional life. Despite all impediments,

Baptism is sought even by families whose overt links with the Church are tenuous; at the other end of the life-span, the Church's participation in funeral rites (if only, sometimes, to the extent of blessing a handful of the earth intended for the grave) is widely appreciated. The impressive quantity of modern crosses in Soviet cemeteries, not to mention the occasional *lampadki*, are evidence of more than a residual faith. The same may be said of the commemorative foods that are shared by relatives at the graveside (and left also for passers-by to share). From baptism to burial, the sacramental system offers comfort and support.

At the same time, the awe which it generates has its negative aspect. Communion is a comparatively rare (albeit therefore extremely important) event in the life of most believers. Four times a year is still considered a desirable norm. Georgi Fedotov wrote of Russian people in the Middle Ages, who "loved the Church with all the beauty and richness of her ritual and all the spiritual comfort they found in it" and in which "so many sacred things – icons, crosses, relics, holy water, blessed bread – surrounded them and nourished them [. . .] that they did not miss the sacrament which had once been the core of liturgical life but had gradually become practically inaccessible or irrelevant to them". These strictures, only lightly modified, might still be addressed to their descendants.

Since the four Lenten seasons are considered particularly appropriate for communion, and since confession is considered a necessary preliminary to it, there is excessive pressure on confessors at such times. Private confession has given way in many parishes to a mixture of public preparation, common expression of penitence and a brief moment of individual absolution, a moment at which the penitent may speak privately of particular sins that burden him. Those who feel the need for more sophisticated spiritual direction may still occasionally establish a relationship with some *starets*, though he may be far to seek.

The Lenten periods and the period of preparation for communion (*govenie*) are periods of abstinence, as are Wednesdays and Fridays of each week. Many of the faithful – the less sophisticated in particular – will keep the fasts with some rigour, fasts that require abstinence from all foods of animal origin (including eggs and dairy products), as well as from frivolity. Their faith thus has an everyday dimension; it is rooted and expressed in Lenten frugality or, at the appropriate time, in festal foods and joy.

Much less frequently does it have an intellectual dimension or expression. Partly, this is because aids to thought, rather than devotion, are rarely available. Texts are difficult to obtain, whether scriptural, liturgical, devotional or apologetic. At the same time, the rarity of texts increases the

receptivity of readers to an extraordinary degree. The occasional, fragmentary typescript has greater impact than the idle rows of religious paperbacks on many a western Christian's shelves.

The same could be said of sermons. Sermons are preached at most services. Their subject matter is based on the day's readings or commemorations: they are unambitious and largely devotional in tone. But whatever their limitations they are listened to with intense seriousness and gratitude.

Contacts between clergy and laity tend to be cordial, though irregular. There is certainly not the regular or extensive visiting of parishioners that British clergy might wish to practise. At the same time, pastoral visits are not out of the question, especially at times of need. Furthermore, some of the clergy will themselves be visited. A zealous clergyman is highly prized. As one parishioner wrote to her priest,

Your stature, pastor, is known to God; and we can only observe with wonder how He trusts you and grants you souls that are torn by prayer out of the clutches of death and hell. God can say to you, Go; and you go. And according to the fulness of your obedience there is no barrier on earth that can impede your approach to the unique lost soul that God has found for you. And when you have found it, pastor, you serve it in all its lowliness as you would serve Christ himself.

According to provincial standards, a pastor's stature is particularly enhanced, not only by his zeal, but also by his devout appearance, his *blagoobrazie*. A bearded, long-haired and – most important – booted cleric conforms to simple people's expectations and to some distant (nineteenth-century cum iconic) prototype.

But a venerable beard is not enough by itself. A cleric's lassitude can lead to low attendance, low parish revenue, poverty-line emoluments for the clergy and, consequently, further lassitude or else withdrawal from the situation.

The influx of youthful and dedicated clergy into the parishes from the theological schools is urgently needed. Recent increases in the student intake at these schools will help to ensure such an influx in the years to come – contrary to the expectations of the last decade.

These parishes are unevenly distributed through the USSR. A variety of factors determine this unevenness: the character of the local state Plenipotentiary for Religious Affairs or of his counterpart, the bishop; the nature of the local parish and (not necessarily in harmony with the latter) the parish council; the history of the region – particularly the date of its incorporation into the USSR and its war-time situation (1941-1944).

The social stratification of the parish or of the Church at large is more difficult to establish. At least it may be said that the less privileged and the elderly are better placed to manifest their adherence to the faith. But membership of the Church is far from being confined to overt church-goers. Even among the latter, young people and members of the intelligentsia are no longer difficult to find. Furthermore, Orthodoxy – not necessarily in its ‘established’ form – attracts even the unattached intelligentsia to a remarkable degree. And such an interest appears to be on the increase.

Part of the attraction has been mentioned: access to a peculiar register of life, access also to the Russian past. For here, indeed, is an alternative Russia, a Russia seeking the sanctification of life, a “Holy Russia” in some sense. But it is not thereby an anti-Soviet enclave. Inevitably, its adherents regret, resent and suffer from some of the Soviet state’s attitudes and actions. At the same time, they evince a Russian (and also Soviet) patriotism, which is genuine – however misguided or inadequate any nationalism may be.

In general, the Orthodox as *citizens of the USSR* do not seek isolation, but rather integration into the social fabric of the state, the sort of integration which is implied in the 1966 decree of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, which rendered illegal “the refusal to accept citizens at work or into an educational establishment; their dismissal from work or exclusion from any educational establishment [. . .], any material restriction on the rights of citizens in respect of their religious adherence”. At the same time, as *Church members* they would undoubtedly welcome more of the independence allegedly accorded to the Church by Lenin’s decree of January 1918.

Meanwhile, the Church as an institution is silent vis à vis Soviet society. But this does not compromise or finally frustrate its witness. Its condition resembles that of the Rublev icon of Christ, found in the autumn of 1918 under a pile of firewood, ready for destruction. Four-fifths of its paint-work has vanished. Yet the steadfast features of a humble Saviour remain. His steadfast gaze ignores the barren wood around, renders it insignificant and, simultaneously, provides it with new dignity.