

In the previous issue of “Syndesmos News” (Volume XVIII-1) we reported on the conference “Youth in the Church: Problems and the Ways to Solve them”, which took place in Moscow 16-21 February 2005. In this issue we include one of the statements of the conference entitled “Church Community, Liturgical Life and Christian Service”. The statements were written by a special working group and unanimously approved by all participants of the conference.

We consider that this statement deserves attention of “Syndesmos News” readers as it represents the position of the most active youth workers of the Orthodox Church in Russia on vital issues of Church life.

## Church Community, Liturgical Life and Christian Service



The participants of the Conference.

### 1. The purpose, sphere of activity and tasks of the church community

The purpose, sphere of activity and tasks of the church community (orthodox parish) are identical to those of the Church as a whole. A parish is the Church expressed in a concrete and visible community. The task of a church community can be generally defined as the salvation of a person in Christ. The centre of a church community's life is the Eucharist, its sphere of activity church services, the realisation of the spiritual life at parish level and the expression of these two things in external service, i.e. the gospel in word and deed. Having united themselves to Christ in the Eucharist, Christians are called to take His gift into the world through their lives and Christian, including social, service.

The activity of a community outside church services proceeds naturally from its Eucharistic life and must in the first instance be directed at the parish itself. Only after this can it be widened beyond this to missionary and social service.

### 2. Principles of relations between the clergy and laity

The basic principles of relations between the parish priest and the

church community can be defined as living as a family, brotherhood and fatherhood, the expression of love and trust between all the members of the parish, both priests and parishioners. In spiritual terms the ideal situation is for the parish priest and other priests of the parish to be the spiritual fathers of the parishioners. On the other hand, the parishioners and priests must observe a certain subordination in their mutual relations, as one often comes across cases of distortion of the principle of fatherhood; for example the sort of relationship, which divides people up into “one of us” and “one of them”, or cases, where one or another community feels itself to be somehow elite. It is essential to understand that such relations are sometimes fostered and provoked by the priest himself.

It is worth noting the importance of the obedience of the parishioners to the priest based on a conscious choice of him as spiritual guide (in the sphere of personal spiritual life), and also based on the status of the service of the priest (in teaching the faith and church administration). At the same time the priest is called to remember that the laity in their entirety constitute, according the apostle Peter “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2 - 9). Therefore the participation of the whole parish in taking important

decisions linked with the life of the community is desirable.

The fatherhood of the priest in relation to the parishioners expresses itself primarily in love, active participation in all the affairs of the community, and also teaching, spiritual guidance and sacramental service. The parish is a family, and all the members of the family, in particular those carrying out pastoral service, are called to actively participate in the life of the community. The role of the priest solely as a server or cult “intermediary” between the people of God and God is unacceptable: the parishioners expect lively and active participation in the life of the community from the pastor.

### 3. Difficulties experienced by young people in the church community

The arrival of a young person in a community without any established traditions of life outside church services places him or her in a position of isolation. In such parishes more often than not there is no desire to fulfil any activity outside services. This is partially explained by the make-up of such parishes and the inertia of their clergy. On the other hand, the communities in churches, which have a developed life outside services and which carry out active Christian service present a different picture. It is precisely to this sort of community that young people most often come, and their advantage consists in the fact that young people are given a chance to actively express themselves in serving their neighbour. One of the main problems of young people in a parish is to find a use for their abilities in the life of the church community. The main factor enabling the coming together of a parish and the arising of relationships outside church services is the presence of a general direction of activity, in which all the parishioners are involved. In its turn, such socialising leads to the attraction of new members to the church. Thus the problems of young people are linked to the absence of a community life as such. Another important factor for young people in the church community is the accessibility of the priest for conversations and personal communication.

It is important to note that the involvement of a young person in the activity of a community must happen in a spirit of Christian love, gradually and without pressure on his or her will. The parish priest is called to build up the life of the community around liturgical service in such a way that parish life becomes its consequence. In this work the spiritual leader fulfils the role of pastor, educator, father, and head of the church community.

### 4. The liturgical life of a community

1. Every member of a Christian community needs to participate fully in liturgical life, the essential aspects of which are:

- a) Active participation in the Liturgy and an aiming towards more frequent Holy Communion, ideally at every Liturgy, at which the person is present: “I see that many people rarely take communion: this is the work of the devil. He obstructs frequent receiving of the body of Christ. And it is obvious that one, who rarely takes communion, gives the devil more power over himself, and the devil takes hold of him and leads him into all evil” (St. John Chrysostom). At the same time it is worth remembering these words of the same saint: “Who should we approve? Those, who take communion once, those, who do so often, or those, who do

so rarely? Neither the first, second, nor third groups, but those, who take communion with a clear conscience, a pure heart, and an irrefragable life”.

- b) Thoughtful, prayerful and active participation in church services and prayer at home. To achieve the last of these the creation of a special short prayer book in Russian for young Christians, who have recently entered the Church is highly desirable.
- c) The Christian service, which is inseparable from the liturgical life of a Christian. In the words of His Holiness Patriarch Alexis II: “service is the fruit of enlightenment in Christ and the continuation of witness to him”. Archbishop Anastasios Yannulatos (the current head of the Orthodox Church of Albania) writes the following on this subject: “The Liturgy must be continued in personal and everyday life. Every believer is called to continue the liturgy on the secret altar of his or her own heart and to realise in this way the living preaching of the Good News for the life of the world. Without this continuation the liturgy in church will remain incomplete.”<sup>1</sup>
- d) Community life. Without friendly and sincere relationships, mutual help and support between the members of the community a person cannot fully take part in the liturgy.
- e) Intense spiritual life, which includes constant testing of oneself, forcing oneself to follow Christ's commandments and the doing of good deeds, sincere repentance, self-denial etc.

The intense spiritual life, to which a Christian is called, depends on the will of the Christians themselves and on the pastoral care he or she receives. However, there are external factors, which cause serious harm to understanding and participation in church services and make it difficult for young people, who have recently come into the church to lead a correct and thoughtful liturgical life. The main ones are:

- I. The separation in the mind of believers of church services from real life. In contemporary church life, as a result of many historical and moral/spiritual factors, church services have to a certain degree lost the sense of common prayer, and have begun to be perceived as a means to “individual” salvation. People come into church often only for themselves. They do not know, and often do not want to know, who is standing and praying next to them. They come to communion with the aim of personal enlightenment; there is little feeling of the one Body of Christ in our parishes. Moreover, the process of prayer itself is often accompanied by a forced effort directed at “blocking out” other people in order that “prayer is not ruined” by the noise, whispering, singing of the choir etc.
- II. Problems of liturgical life expressed in lack of comprehension of the meaning of church services:
  1. The demands of contemporary young people coming into the church have revealed the problem of the impenetrability of the Eucharist for parishioners. This is not a new problem, but for young people it is one of the most important. The reading of the so called “secret prayers” in a quiet voice or

1. Archbishop Anastasios Yannulatos. Liturgy after the liturgy.

to himself by the priest causes serious damage to comprehension, meaning that the “vast majority of the laity do not know and do not hear the text of the Eucharist itself, and are deprived of this priceless gift. And after all no one has ever explained, why the **“chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people called by God to proclaim the mighty acts of him, who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”** (1 Peter 2-9) cannot hear the prayers, which they themselves are bringing to God”<sup>2</sup>.

2. Inaudible, quiet, quick reading and singing of texts from services, including the Apostle and the Gospel, and also lengthy remembering of the living and departed in the litanies.
3. Texts, which are theologically incorrect, for example the service of the burial of the Mother of God. A correction of such texts by the Synodal service commission of the Russian Orthodox Church is desirable.
4. The closing of the Royal Doors by the presiding priest, as a result of which, is lost the spirit of common prayer.
5. The difficulty of understanding the language of church services, especially for beginners. Patriarch Alexis II remarks: “Slavonic is not comprehensible to everyone: for this reason many liturgists of our Church have long been considering the question of translating the whole round of service texts into Russian<sup>3</sup>. Even someone as far back as Bishop Sergei Starogorodskii (the future Patriarch) wrote of the **“simplification of the Slavonic used in services** and the granting of the right to serve in their native tongue, where a parish desires it”<sup>4</sup>. A speeding up of the renewal process of the Slavonic translation of the service texts and a correction of the mistakes in them is essential. This was remarked upon already by Saint Theofan the Recluse: “There is something extremely necessary. I am talking about a new, simplified and clarified translation of the church service books. Our service texts are all edifying, meaningful and noble. In them lies all the theological learning and teaching of Christianity, all the consolations, and all the deterrents from doing wrong. Whoever listens to them can do without any other books on Christian teaching. However, a large number of these texts are completely incomprehensible. This deprives the church books of the fruit, which they could produce, and does not allow them to serve those aims, for which they are intended and for which we have them. As a result of this a new translation of the service books is immediately essential. We need to start this work as soon as we possibly can if we do not wish to bear the reproach for this anomaly and be the cause of the harm, which arises from it”<sup>5</sup>.

2. Prot. Alexander Schmemmann “The Eucharist: the Mystery of the Kingdom”, p. 299

3. The speech of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia at the ceremony of the awarding an honorary doctorate to him by the Spiritual Academy of Tbilisi during a visit of His Holiness to Georgia from the 27th April - 1st May 1996. See the information bulletin of the Department of external church affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate of 1st July 1996, p.3

4. Remarks of the diocesan archbishops, III, 433

5. Bishop Theofan. Edificatory reading, No 10. M., 1986, III pp. 462 - 463

6. An unjustifiably long pause between the prayers said before communion and communion itself, which has a negative effect, the perception of the Liturgy as a whole by believers.

III. The wide variations in the demands and conditions placed on Christians for participation in Holy Communion. His Holiness Patriarch Alexis II has commented that “sometimes believers are not permitted access to Holy communion on insufficient grounds”<sup>6</sup>. Bearing in mind that the barring of a Christian from Eucharistic communion is established by canon law for relatively serious transgressions, the participants of the conference are in favour of a standardisation of the demands made on communicants.

IV. Distractions in church services

- 1) Buying and selling and noise in church.
- 2) The presence of un-canonical representations and icons.
- 3) Unselective and excessively 'operatic' singing.
- 4) Making confessions during the Liturgy, when this is not justified by necessity.
- 5) The conducting of several services (molebens, panikhidas, burial services) simultaneously in the same church etc.

To make entering and staying in the Church easier for young people it would be possible to lessen the above negative factors by giving parishes the right to conduct **special missionary services**, in which would be included elements of catechesis and which would have the following particularities:

1. The service would, where necessary, be interrupted by catechesis and the explanation of prayers, without destroying its wholeness and the prayer of the believers.
2. A pious silence would be observed during the service. All buying and selling would stop and other distracting factors would be removed.
3. The closing and opening of the Royal Doors would be carried out according to the order for a bishop.
4. The gospel, the apostle and other readings from Scripture would be read or repeated in Russian.
5. The content of the 'secret' liturgical prayers would definitely be conveyed to the congregation.
6. The pause between the prayers said before communion and communion itself would be reduced to a minimum.

With Episcopal blessing such services are already being conducted in various dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church. A widening of these would be an active response to the problem already pointed out by His Holiness Patriarch Alexis II in 1996 of 'making the liturgical culture of Orthodoxy accessible to our contemporaries in the interests of mission'<sup>7</sup>.

6. His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Alexis II “A true elder cares for all people.”

7. The speech of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia at the ceremony of the awarding an honorary doctorate to him by the Spiritual Academy of Tbilisi during a visit of His Holiness to Georgia from the 27th April - 1st May 1996. See the information bulletin of the Department of external church affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate of 1st July 1996, p.3.

## 5. Opportunities for young people to express themselves in the life of a community

Internal parish life is called to transfer the emphasis from the necessity of performing external rites to the internal life of a person and make life itself into service of God and communion with him. **The church community is called to give the young person the same as the Church as a whole: 'life in all its fullness'**. The most important thing in Christianity is unification with Christ and life with Him and in Him, which is by no means guaranteed by outward piety and the semblance of a spiritual life, but only by the realisation of the Gospel in one's life. The Eucharist and the life of a community outside the liturgy, which proceeds from it as its source, is this fullness of the home, work, leisure and other aspects of the life and activity of a person. Thus all that is done in the spheres of church, services, mission and spirituality is only a means of union with Christ.

Some parishes specialise in a particular field of activity. This can be expressed in social, missionary, educational service etc. At the same time life in such parishes is not limited to the chosen activity. If the principle of fatherhood and family life is observed in the community, then life itself defines concrete aims, roles and types of service. The most important task of the community is to build its life around the Eucharist as the centre of the group. A church community, as a true family, chooses and realises that type of service, for which a demand arises on a daily basis. In this way the types of activity carried out by a young person in the community outside church services depend first of all on his or her desire, abilities, the intensity of his or her parish liturgical and family life, and also on the experience of the parish priest.

The types of this service can be as follows:

1. Helping the clergy in services.
2. Domestic obediences within the parish.
3. Teaching children in Sunday school.
4. Missionary service.
5. Educational service.
6. Social service.
7. Youth service etc.

## 6. Dangers of a spiritual character for the young person in a community

Spiritual dangers and problems arise most sharply for a young person during his or her period as a neophyte. This happens in connection with an incorrect directing of spiritual effort, idealising the external life of the Church, excessive emphasis on certain phenomena, a tendency to look for incontrovertible spiritual authorities (including priests) with the aim of placing responsibility for one's life onto them.

The following things in particular are causes of this. Firstly, an inexperienced person tends to perceive the practical recommendations made to separate people in the literature of the church fathers as general church rules for the spiritual life. As a result a monastic way of life is transferred to the daily life of a Christian. Such a perception of particular solutions as universal for the life of any other person is dangerous. The great ascetics approached each person individually; therefore their experience

should not be interpreted without taking into account the cultural and historical context or their writings.

Secondly, in certain conditions a person, who has recently entered the church, has a tendency to idealise priests, thinking that the grace given to the priesthood guarantees each pastor individual sainthood. As a result of this approach some orthodox Christians mistakenly take a priest as a supreme authority and try to construct their whole life in accordance with his smallest opinion or desire.

Another danger for the church community is to put activity outside services in first place, i.e. to turn the church into a hobbies club.

Often one comes across the elementary irresponsibility of a member of the community, who has undertaken to fulfil certain duties, and does not do so. This problem may have not only spiritual, but also psychological reasons, and is unfortunately widespread in parish life.

## Conclusion

It is essential to admit that the majority of the problems mentioned above, as a rule, have their roots in the long persecutions of the church, which have caused a break in its spiritual and church traditions, and also in the incorrect interpretations of these by contemporary people. In the majority of Eastern European countries church communities were destroyed and there was not even talk of their rebirth. Those churches, which were still not closed, were perceived only as places for the provision of religion to the population.

Unfortunately in our time of relative freedom the process of rebirth of church communities has met with new difficulties. The natural conservatism of the Orthodox Church sometimes plays a negative role here. The traditions and way of life of parishes, which have built up through particular historical factors over several decades, have begun to be seen as almost straight from the fathers, as absolutely orthodox. As a result some parish priests are afraid to change anything in their parish, including creating a community life.

Today it is already becoming clear that it is important to shift emphasis from the rebirth of external church forms and material welfare to the creation of community life and creative work in the church.

The processes happening at present in the church give us the right to look towards the future with optimism. In spite of all the complications people turn to the church with hope; the number of parishes is growing, to some degree also thanks to young people. Having passed through the phase of being neophytes as through natural growth pains, people gain the true meaning and joy of life in the love of Christ and unity with Him. Missionary work and catechesis are being renewed. The level of self-awareness within the church is growing. Faith rooted in the words of Christ: **"I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not overcome it"** (Matt. 16 - 18) give us strength to fulfil Christian service of our neighbour.

*Translated from Russian by John Pumphrey*