

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

On the Veneration of the Saints *

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CHRIST HAS CONQUERED THE WORLD. This victory is further unveiled and fulfilled in the fact that He built His Church. In Christ and through Christ the unity of mankind was brought about truly for the first time, for those who believed in His Name become the Body of Christ. And through uniting with Christ they unite likewise with each other in a most sincere concord of love. In this great unity all empirical distinctions and barriers are done away with: differences of birth in the flesh are effaced within the unity of a spiritual birth. The Church is a new people filled with grace, which does not coincide with any physical boundaries or any earthly nation— neither Greeks nor Jews, and a struggle of faith, through the "Mystery of water," through a union with Christ in the "Mysterious font," through the "grace of becoming sons" ; i.e. "sons of God" for Whom "were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth." In Holy Christening the one to be enlightened leaves "this world" and forsakes its vanity, as if freeing himself and stepping out of the natural order of things; from the order of "flesh and blood" one enters an order of grace. All inherited ties and all ties of blood are severed. But man is not left solitary or alone. For according to the expression of the Apostle "by one Spirit are we all baptized," neither Scythians nor Barbarians— and this nation does not

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spring through a relationship of blood but through freedom into one Body. The whole meaning of Holy Christening consists in the fact that it is a mysterious acceptance into the Church, into the City of God, into the Kingdom of Grace. Through Christening the believer becomes a member of the Church, enters the "one Church of angels and men," becomes a "co-citizen of the saints and ever with God," according to the mysterious and solemn words of St. Paul— one comes "to mount Zion, and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and Church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the judge

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of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” And in this great throng he is united unto Christ. For, “*unus Christianus— nullus Christianus*” [“one Christian— no Christian”].

The essence of the Church is in its unity, for the Church is the Mansion of the One Spirit. This is not an external and empirical unity or catholicity. The Ecumenical character of the Church is not something external, quantitative, spatial, not even any geographical quality, and does not at all depend on the universal dispersal of believers. The visible unity of the Church is merely a result but not a foundation for the catholicity of the Church. Geographical “universality” is a derivative and not an essential necessity. The catholicity of the Church was not diminished in the first ages of Christianity when communities of the faithful were scattered like small islands, almost lost in the immense world of unbelief and resistance. It is likewise not diminished now when the majority of mankind is not with Christ. “Though a town or even a province fall away from the Ecumenical Church,” says Metropolitan Philaret, “the Ecumenical Church will always remain a complete and incorruptible body.” Likewise the Church will remain Ecumenical in the “last days” when it will be compressed into the “little flock,” when the mystery of “retreat” will be revealed and when

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faith will hardly be found on earth. For the Church is Catholic according to its *nature*.

If one seeks for external definitions, then perhaps the Ecumenical nature of the Church is best expressed by the feature of its “*all-timeness*” (of its running through all times). For believers of all ages and all generations, who are alive now, who lived, and who will be born, belong to it in the same way. They all form one body, and through the same prayer are united into one before the one throne of the Lord of Glory. The experience of this unity through all times is revealed and sealed in the whole cycle of Divine worship. In the Church *time is mysteriously overcome*. The outpouring of grace seems to stop time, to stop the run of minutes and seasons, to overcome even the general order of consecutiveness and the disconnectedness of those things which took place at different times. In a unity with Christ through grace, in the gift of communion with the One different epochs and generations become our Spirit, men of living contemporaries. Christ reigns equally in the Church among the departed and among the living, for God is not God of the dead but of the living.

The Church is a Kingdom not of this world but an eternal Kingdom, for it has an eternal King— Christ. The Church is a kind of mysterious image of eternity and a foretaste of the Resurrection of all. For Christ the Head of the Body is “the life and *the resurrection*” of His servants and brothers. The measure of births has not yet been filled and the stream of time still flows. The Church is still in its historical wanderings but even now time has no power and no strength in it. It is as if the Apocalyptic moment is forestalled— when there shall be no more time and all time shall cease. Earthly death, the separation of the soul from the body, does not sever the tie between those who have faith, does not part and does not separate co-members in Christ, does not exclude the deceased from the limits and composition of the Church. In the prayer for the departed and

in the order for burial we pray Christ “our immortal King and God” to send the souls of the departed to the habitations of the holy, “to the abodes of the righteous,” “to the bosom of Abraham,” where all the righteous are at rest. And with special expressiveness in these parting prayers we remember and call on the hosts of the righteous, and on the Mother of God, and on the powers of heaven, and on the holy martyrs and on all the saints as on our heavenly co-citizens in the Church. With powerful emphasis the all-timely and catholic consciousness of the Church is disclosed in the order of burial. The faithful who attain to a genuine union with Christ Himself in their struggle and in the saving “mysteries” cannot be parted from Him even by death. “Blessed are they who die in the Lord— their souls shall abide with the blessed.” And the prayers for the departed are a witness and measure of the *catholic consciousness* of the Church.

Reverently the Church watches for any signs of grace which witness and confirm the earthly struggle of the departed. By an inner sight the Church recognizes both the righteous living and departed, and the feeling of the Church is sealed by the witness of the priesthood of the Church. In this recognition of its brothers and members who have “attained to perfection” consists the mystical essence of that which in the Christian West is termed the “canonization of saints,” and which is understood by the Orthodox East as their glorification, magnification and blessedness. And firstly it is a glorification of God “Wondrous is the Lord in His saints.” “God’s saints,” said St. John of Damascus, “reigned over and mastered their passions and kept uninjured the likeness unto the image of God, according to which they were created; they of their own free will united themselves with God and received Him into the habitation of their heart, and having thus received Him in communion, through grace, they became in their very nature like unto Him.” In them God rests— they became “ the treasures and the

pure habitations of God.” In this the mystery was accomplished. For as the ancient fathers said— the Son of God became man so that men could be deified, so that sons of men should become sons of God. And in the righteous who attain to love this measure of growth and “likening” unto Christ is fulfilled. “The Saints in their lifetime already were filled with the Holy Spirit,” continues St. John of Damascus, “and when they died the grace of the Holy Spirit was still present with their souls and with their bodies in the graves, and with their images and with their holy ikons not because of their nature but because of grace and its activity... the saints are alive and with daring they stand before the Lord; they are not dead... the death of saints is more like falling asleep than death,” for they “abide in the hand of God”; that is, in life and in light... and “after He Who is Life itself and the source of life was ranked among the dead, we consider no more as dead those who depart with a hope of resurrection and with faith in Him.” And it is not only to get help and intercession that the Holy Spirit teaches every believer to pray to the glorified saints but also because this calling on them, through communion in prayer, deepens the consciousness of the catholic unity of the Church. In our invocation of the

saints our measure of Christian love is exhibited, a living feeling of unanimity and of the power of Church unity is expressed; and, conversely, doubt or inability to feel the intercession of grace and the intervention of saints on our behalf before God witnesses not only to a weakening of love and of the brotherly and Church ties and relationships but also to a decrease in the fulness of faith in the Ecumenical value and power of the Incarnation and Resurrection.

One of the most mysterious anticipations of the Orthodox Church is the contemplation of the “Protecting Veil of the Mother of God,” of Her constant standing in prayer for the world, surrounded by all the saints, before the throne of ‘God. “Today the Virgin stands in the Church and with

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hosts of saints invisibly prays to God for us all; angels and high priests worship; apostles and prophets embrace each other— it is for us that the Mother of God prays unto the Eternal God!” Thus the Church remembers the vision which was once seen by St. Andrew, the fool for Christ’s sake. And that which was then visibly revealed remains now and will stand for all ages. The “Contemplation of the Protecting Veil” of the Mother of God is a vision of the celestial Church, a vision of the unbreakable and ever-existent unity of the heavenly and the earthly Church. Arid it is also a foreseeing that all existence beyond the grave, of the righteous and the saints, is one untiring prayer, one ceaseless intercession and mediation. For love is the “union of all perfection.” And the blessedness of the righteous is an abiding in love. The Great Eastern saint St. Isaac the Syrian, with incomparable daring, bore witness to the all-embracing power which crowns a Christian’s struggles. According to his words this struggle for God acquires fulness and completeness and attains its aim in purity— and purity is “a heart which is merciful to every created being.” And what is a heart that has its mercy? asks the saint, and answers: “A burning of the heart for all creation for men, birds, beasts, demons and all creatures. And from remembrance of them and contemplation of them such a man’s eyes shed tears: because of a great and strong compassion which possesses his heart and its great constancy, he is overwhelmed with tender pity and he cannot bear, or hear of, or see any harm or any even small sorrow which creatures suffer. And therefore he prays hourly with tears for the dumb animals, and for the enemies of Truth and for those who harm him that they should be guarded and that they should be shown mercy; and also for all the reptiles he prays, from this great compassion which is constantly aroused in his heart in likeness to God.” And if even on earth so fiery is the prayer of saints, even with a more fiery flame it burns “there” in the “embrace of the Father” on the bosom of

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Divine Love, close to God, Whose Name is Love, Whose care about the World is Love. And in the *Church Triumphant* prayers for the whole Catholic Church do not cease. As St. Cyprian said— Christian prayer is for all the world; everyone prays not only for himself but for all people, for all from one, and so we pray not with a particular individual prayer but with one common to all, with one soul in all. The whole deed of prayer must

be determined by an ecumenical consciousness and unanimous love, which includes likewise those whose names are known to God alone. It is not characteristic of a Christian to feel himself alone and separated from all, for he is saved only in the unity of the Church. And the crown of all prayer is that flaming love which was expressed in the prayer of Moses: "Forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written..." The center of Church worship is Eucharistic worship. Here the *whole* Church is united also. Here a sacrifice is made and prayers are offered "for all and for all things," here the whole Church is remembered the militant and the triumphant. In the mystery-action of the Liturgy "the powers of heaven invisibly celebrate with us," they are present and celebrate with the celebrating priest. And unto great saints it was granted sometimes by God's grace to contemplate in visible form that which is hidden from the sight of the sinful— the co-celebration of the angels. Thus it is known that St. Seraphim of Sarov on one occasion was granted to see the triumphant entrance of the Lord of Glory surrounded by hosts of angels. Such an entrance of the Lord of Glory is often represented in ikon form on the walls of the holy Altar, and not only as a symbol but likewise as an indication that invisibly all this actually takes place. And all the ikon decoration of the Church generally speaks of the mysterious unity, of the actual presence of the saints with us. "We picture Christ, the King and the Lord, without separating Him from His army, for, the Army of the Lord are the saints"— said St. John of

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Damascus. Holy ikons are not only images of remembrance, "images of the past and of righteousness," not only pictures, but are actually sacred things with which, as the fathers explained, the Lord is "present" and by grace is "in communion" with them. There exists some mysterious objective tie between the "image" and the "Prototype," between the likeness and the one who is represented, which is specially marked in miracle-working ikons which show God's power. "A venerating worship" of holy ikons clearly expresses the idea of the Church's conception of the past: it is not only a remembrance directed to something gone, but a vision by grace of something fixed in eternity, a vision of something mysterious, a presence by grace of those who are dead and parted from us, "a joyful vision of a unity of all creation."

All creation has a Head in Christ. And through His Incarnation the Son of God, according to the wonderful expression of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, "*again* commenced a long row of human beings." The Church is the spiritual posterity of the Second Adam and in its history His redemptive work is fulfilled and completed, while His love blossoms and flames in it. The Church is a fulfillment of Christ and His Body. According to the bold words of St. John Chrysostom, "only then is the Fulfiller the Head when a perfect body shall be formed." There is some mysterious movement— which started from the awe-filled day of Pentecost, when in the face of the first chosen few it was as if all creation received a fiery christening by the Spirit towards that last aim, when in all its glory the New Jerusalem shall appear and the Bridal Feast of the Lamb shall begin. In the stretch of ages the guests and the chosen are being collected. The people of the eternal

Kingdom are being assembled. The Kingdom is being selected and set aside beyond the limits of time. The fulfillment shall be accomplished in the last resurrection— then the complete fulness and glory and the whole meaning of Church *catholicity* shall be revealed.