

THE NARTHEX

*The believers were first called
Christians at Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26
JULY - SEPTEMBER 2007

On Being Human

Between the 6th - 8th July I attended the Pan-Orthodox conference held at Swanwick on 'Revealing Christ to the World.' It provided three keynote speakers and forums for debate, as well as an opportunity for a separate meeting of the Antiochian Deanery clergy. Among the speakers was Fr. Thomas Hopko, (who also joined our Deanery clergy meeting) the recently retired Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York. Fr. Thomas, renowned in the Orthodox world as a writer [- he has written an extremely good four-volume catechism] presented the idea that to be fully human, one had to be in search of God. In other words, it belongs to the fullness of human nature to be a God-seeker. As Blessed Augustine of Hippo wrote, *'Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.'*

More specifically, the baptized Orthodox Christian who partakes of the Liturgy, engages in the ascetic struggle, endeavours to fulfil the gospel commandments can but grow in the likeness of God. The saint of God is therefore the icon of what it is to be fully human as intended by God in creation. Fr. Thomas writes in his catechism, *The Orthodox Faith* (vol.i p.54): *'One can only understand and appreciate what it means to be human only in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. Being the Divine Word and Son of God in human flesh, Jesus reveals the real meaning of manhood... To bear the image of God is to be like Christ, the Uncreated image of God and to share in all the spiritual attributes of divinity.'* This analysis is, of course, fully in accord with Orthodox theology and most especially because it presents us with a beautiful vision of what we may become in Christ; an aspiration that gives meaning to our existence

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on earth. However, the theological correctness of this idea notwithstanding, it resounds on the other hand with an equal and opposite problem that I raised with Fr. Thomas at the conference. That is, if to be fully human is to be saved in Christ - having, as it were, re-entered into paradise in the New Adam - what does it mean for those left outside, what is their status? So In this issue of the Narthex I should like to reflect on exactly how we relate to those who are outside Christ, rather than in Christ and on what our duty is towards them.

There is, as we may quickly realise, real spiritual danger in assuming that the only human beings on the planet are those Christians who are fully alive in God. This is, I think, for two reasons. Firstly, in that it might precipitate the soul into spiritual pride and verge upon the more exclusive characteristics of the Gnostic heresies, purporting to lay claim to membership of a spiritual elite, separate from the great mass of fallen humanity. Secondly, such an idea is easily twisted in matters of ethics, making moral distinctions between the *saved* and the *unsaved*. The 'dehumanising' of ones enemy is, after all, the first stage in any war or violence, beginning as it does with insults, denigrating the status of the foe whether it be Nazis calling Jews sub-human or Islamist terrorists fulminating against western decadence. This is why Christ taught that anger and name-calling were the first stage of murder [Matt. 5:22].

This, of course, cannot possibly be what Fr. Thomas means in his interpretation of the Orthodox doctrine of Theosis [II Pet.1:4]. There has, though, been a tendency among the Orthodox, especially in their interaction with other Christians, to be guilty of a certain

exclusivity. We certainly believe that the Eastern Orthodox Church *is* the one Church of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the Creed of Nicea, in direct apostolic continuity with that founded by Christ at Pentecost. We certainly believe that we hold the true faith, according to the final revelation of God and that we worship in the right (Orthodox) way in accordance with Holy Tradition. But how do we relate to those outside; what is their moral and spiritual status?

To start with, it has often been remarked that, although we know where the Church is, we cannot know where she is not. Schism, we know cannot happen to Christ's 'seamless robe'; it is the schismatic who breaks away from the Church but she, herself, cannot be divided. Conversely, there may be those who are members of the body of Christ, as yet unknown and only known to God. Similarly, mere membership of the Church does not, of itself, guarantee the soul's participation in the Kingdom of God. We may still maintain that there is no salvation outside the church but that still begs the question as to whom God sees as within or without; as St. Paul says [Rom 14:4] *'Who art thou who judgest another man's servant?'*

For this reason we receive those who were baptized in other Christian communions through Chrismation, making up by economia that which was lacking - full baptism being for those unbaptized at all (whether previously of no religion or from a non-Christian faith) or who were 'baptized' by a pseudo-Christian or heretical group (such as Mormon or Jehovah's Witnesses). Having said this, however, the fact remains in that, as the Orthodox Church reveals the pleroma (fullness) of Christ to the world, those outside

have still the duty to seek refuge among us for the time grows short [Acts.2:38-40; Rom.13:11].

What then of those who do not know Christ or reject the gospel for whatever reason? What is the status of their humanity? Fr. Thomas put forward the suggestion that they were not human at all! - I took him to mean *as God intended at the creation*; that their humanity - and ours before our baptism - was lost, not in the sense of having been destroyed but lost in the sense of having wandered off the path of Life (Ζωή). This does not class them as sub-human in the biological meaning of the word, as if they were now Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon to our Homo Sapiens! Nor does it mean that they have a moral status merely alongside other animal species and no more. True, all animal life must be treated with respect and kindness but human life, clearly, has more value [Matt.6:26]. The truth is that, though, they might still be children of wrath to use a biblical phrase, it is from such that the redeemed are made, for we ourselves were once among them; no one is born Christian, only reborn. It is in the very nature of the divine love that God seeks out what is lost whilst we are yet estranged from him [1Jn.4:10]. This in itself establishes our attitude to those who are on the outside: that we are here to call them in; to reveal Christ to the world, only we are called to do this with urgency for we (and they) do not have for ever. Furthermore, judgement begins, as we know, with the household of God [1 Pet.4:17] which is why repentance is such a feature of Orthodox spirituality and indeed, the Liturgy. Repentance is, after all, the very process wherein the fullness of our humanity is being restored.

So there are, as it were, two humanities corresponding to the old and the new Adam. There is the biological creature, fallen into this world, time-bound and walking, each one, inevitably towards the precipice of his own, individual doom. And there is that which has been turned around, washed, anointed, re-clothed, following the pilgrim path in search of God.

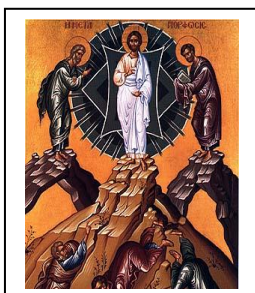
In the light of this, we should not be surprised that given the decline of Christianity in our own land, that so much of our political, civil, educational, medical, recreational and general

national life tends now towards the inhuman. It seems inevitable that, for the developed world, the rate of change is ever increasing, driven to a great extent by technology but also through the abandonment of the old moralities and the discarding of traditional moral compasses. It is as if the human psyche has difficulty relating to the accelerating changes in the structure of our society and our relationships within it. But this is certainly being achieved and is resulting in the steady dehumanising of Man himself. (Incidentally, Fr. Thomas recommended C. S. Lewis' book, *'The Abolition of Man'* as having predicted all this a long time ago.) Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the whole area of marriage and family ties, with the breakdown of ancient certainties, so often endorsed by government policies. What will be left of Adam and Eve in the new genetically modified, artificially conceived clone, confined in political rectitude and, finally, euthanased when its economic productivity is exhausted? It is a nightmare, worthy of the apocalypse and the abolition of our race. But whilst we contemplate that and shudder, let us instead turn our minds to those two great feasts in August, the Transfiguration and the Dormition, pointing us towards an altogether different destiny.

O Light that never sets, why hast Thou cast me from Thy face? And why hast the alien darkness covered me in my wretchedness? But I entreat Thee, cause me to return and direct my paths towards the light of Thy commandments.

[Irmos of the 2nd Canon, Cant. 5 of Orthros for the Feast of the Transfiguration.]

Fr. Chrysostom



SERVICES

AUGUST

1st Wed Beginning of the Dormition Fast

5th Sun 10th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

6th Mon The Transfiguration
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

12th Sun 11th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

14th Tues Eve of the Dormition Vespers
Divine Liturgy 6.00pm

19th Sun 12th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

26th Sun 13th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

SEPTEMBER

2ND Sun 14th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

9th Sun before Holy Cross
(Pentecost 15)
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

16th Sun after Holy Cross
(Pentecost 16)
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

23rd Sun 17th after Pentecost
Conception of John the Forerunner
Divine Liturgy 10.45am



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