

TO EMMAUS, WITH JESUS BETWEEN US
By Vladimir Berzonsky*

At first glance one would consider that Orthodox Christians and the communions derived from 16th-century Anabaptism are so remote from one another that there is insufficient common ground to warrant serious discussion. Each approaches the Christian faith with different premises. Where might dialogue begin?

We might begin by considering one another as God's children who believe in the Triune nature of the One God and affirm that Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God, entered the world to save sinners by His death and resurrection. But we have differing understandings of the implications of those basic spiritual facts. If we indeed are to have some respect for one another's doctrinal positions, it must transcend patronizing clichés based on what just may be inadequate theology. Christ's call for unity demands that we explore the premises behind our stated convictions.

Let's imagine a prototypical Orthodox and an Anabaptist taking the place of those

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two disciples of our Lord on their way to Emmaus on that glorious afternoon of the resurrection (Lk. 24:13-35). We pose the situation this way in order to push it to its limits: Eastern Christianity, which did not actively participate in either Roman Catholicism or the Protestant renewal of Europe versus the so-called left wing of the Reformation. At least in the Gospel we find Clopas and his companion in serious discourse over the momentous events that shaped history, which is more than we have often done in company with one another. And their surly demeanor ("Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn't know what things have happened there in these days?" v.18) rather suggests the attitude we sometimes take, not to Christ but to one another. We too have made sweeping generalizations about each other that may not be accurate, just as the two disciples made about their unknown traveling companion, for, contrary to their false assumption, Jesus was not a resident of that city.

We go as equals, both followers of Christ, knowing something of that momentous day's events without comprehending all of its implications until they are pointed out to us, and by none other than the stranger in our midst whom we fail to recognize.

It would be helpful to contemplate the facts and realize how the Holy Spirit within us, listening to the Lord Jesus, reveals the meaning of the weekend's happenings by

disclosing God's plan of salvation conceived before the cosmos came into existence. And He does this, in a literal sense, step by step.

We are leaving Jerusalem, the city that has done its worst to Him who tried His best to redeem it, even while knowing that, as He told the woman at Jacob's well, God cannot be localized or described because He is Spirit.

Spirituality, like so many terms commonly used by Christians, has a variety of understandings and connotations for believers. One of my seminary mentors felt that we would be better served by eliminating the term "spirituality" from our religious vocabulary and substituting "Christian life."¹ I suggest we take the cue from another writer who had created a handbook on spirituality and offer the term "spiritual theology"² since it includes all members of the Holy Trinity: theos, the Father; logos, the Son of God; and spiritus-pneumatos, the Holy Spirit. In this way we unite those who share a common essence (ousis), yet who are divided in person (hypostasis).

Christ expounds the Scriptures on the way to Emmaus; thus we would do well to begin and end in the Bible. It was Basil of Caesarea who insisted upon the principle that the witness of Scripture must verify every word and deed of the Church and its members.³ We must emphasize, however, the

difficulty of knowing the mind of Christ and the danger of assuming that our version of truth is His. How do we approach this basic hermeneutical problem?

We pray that He be ever between us on the way. Even when we cannot recognize Him--perhaps not even realizing that we are together walking along the path from the Jerusalem of time and space towards the Jerusalem from above (Rev. 21)--it behooves us to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, who will expound the meaning of the Scriptures in light of Jesus Christ.

From the beginning throughout the journey we do well to realize our biases and limitations. We may take as truisms what others have thought through and passed on to us without ever testing and probing, limited by the fact that we as individuals are finite by definition, looking out from one set of eyes and interpreting cosmic events by means of our circumscribed perspectives.

Asking About Ourselves

Assuming that "beginning with Moses" (Lk. 24:27) means the Torah, we may ask Christ, not only about God but about ourselves. Taking a cue from Psalm 8:4 ("what are human beings ...?"), we have a new look at our creation in Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"). Do we Orthodox make too much of the different terms "image"

and "likeness"? Granted, in Hebrew they may appear as synonyms (be-selem, ke-demut), but we read the Septuagint, and we remind others that it was the Bible of the Church for the first generation of Christians. The Greek eikon (image) can be understood as that gift of God's image which offers us a dignity and nobility that come with being human, while homoiosis ("likeness") grants us the opportunity to strive towards becoming what we are already.

We cannot walk far together without coming to some tacit agreement on this issue. Orthodox will feel that we have here a personal way of realizing another aspect of the "already" and "not yet" tension which characterizes our existence. Now we are made in God's image, while we have at least one lifetime to complete the likeness to God by becoming what we already are in His mind.

We might anticipate the objections from Protestant scholars, dominated often by the sweeping theology of Augustine, to consider the Orthodox approach to spirituality a form of hubris, the pride of human affirmation which the African renounced in the battle against Pelagius. Salvation, the Augustinian Reformers would contend, must be the pure gift of God which comes through faith alone (sola fide), the absolute sovereignty of God demanding nothing more from the human being than reception. This identity of sola gratia with a particular conclusion, extrinsic justification,⁴ thereby changes noth-

ing in us in the process.

Of course, we've gone through this gunboat style of theological "discourse" time after time in the past, where the Orthodox now draw up their ship alongside and fire back by an attack on the limits of the sixteenth-century academic setting, steeped as it was in scholasticism (i.e., a grace that either saves us without having an effect on us or else works along with our independent cooperation, which would mean that we save ourselves).⁵

Salvation for such western Christians involves grace being added to the "natural" person. For an eastern Christian a person is by his or her very nature made in the image of God (by the grace of the Holy Spirit). It's not a matter of grace added to nature to form a supernatural being, but of the human and divine aspects that are basic to having been formed a creature made to share the nature of God. And it doesn't mean that we are swallowed up in the process, like a pat of butter in a furnace. On the contrary, we can only be truly the person we are when we are freed from sin and filled with virtue.

It may be that our differences can be understood by examining our battle scars. Orthodox witnesses to truth were early "struggling against religions; basically dualistic in nature: Manichees, Bogomils, Messalians and the like,⁶ while the Reformers continued the seemingly never-ending

Augustinian dispute against Pelagius, which takes the form of demonstrations as to how human nature has been weakened and corrupted by sin. I don't imply that Augustine was misguided--only that the weapons against sin have been colored in variant shades since our enemies have been diverse.⁷

Augustine's severe judgment on human potential dominates western Christianity and persists relentlessly throughout both Catholicism and Protestantism. If, for instance, the father of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11ff.) is Christ's way of conveying the relationship of a heavenly Parent to a sinful child, is God (in the famous words of Jonathan Edwards) "an angry God," or more like a wise, loving Father waiting for His child to realize sin, repent and return home?

In general, the Orthodox will have a more winsome concept of the human being's potential for atonement, for they are aware that they are challenged with the responsibility for their oneness with God, never forgetting for an instant that it is God who takes the initiative. The Father has sent His only-begotten Son into the world, who accomplished everything He came to achieve (tetelesthai, Jn. 19:39). When He returned from whence He had come, the Holy Spirit then was sent to complete the process of salvation, a process that never does violence to the freedom of our opportunity to cooperate in our own salvation. By

opening ourselves to the prompting and whispers of the Spirit within, we draw ever nearer to Jesus Christ who introduces us to His Father. And by a miraculous mystery incomprehensible to our limited nature, we too are adopted into that Holy Family and permitted to understand what is meant when we call the Almighty our "Abba."

In the matter of the Holy Spirit, it is imperative that we investigate our trinitarian and christological statements. The Orthodox seem to feel that all westerners, Catholic and Protestant alike, have a defective concept of the Holy Spirit that can be traced to the great and blessed Augustine. In his stating one truth, that the Father and Son are united by love and that love engenders the Holy Spirit, he leaves the Spirit, the Orthodox feel, in a category that disallows complete sharing with the other Persons of the Trinity.

Identifying with Mary and John

As we continue with the Lord towards Emmaus, it would be most natural for an Orthodox Christian to express some interest regarding Jesus' earthly family, especially His mother. Christianity is not a faith for adults only, according to the Orthodox awareness of family values, therefore, it would be most natural to call to mind the scenario of the Cross. We remember that before He could utter that term so pregnant

with meaning, "It is finished," He took into account the welfare of His mother. Recall that He entrusted her to the one apostle filled with enough courage and love to dare be at His side in those traumatic moments before His death (Jn. 19:27).

Can we not begin to consider a spiritual value by identifying with the beloved disciple, challenging ourselves to love as much as he, so that we might identify with both Mary and John? Consider: what other persons in the New Testament had known as much about the historical Jesus? And, with the possible exception of Paul, which of them had made more spiritual progress?

Think of Mary the girl at Annunciation, the birthing episodes, the Cana wedding, even the misunderstandings of her Son's mission (Lk. 2:48; Mk... 3:31)--here was one who grew in grace. So did John, from being the seeker with Andrew called with James "Boanerges" for his irascible temper (Mk. 3:17), through the courageous stand at the cross and his dash to the tomb, to becoming the legendary old man of the church uttering to one and all: "Little children, love one another."

"We Have Beheld His Glory"

Continuing on the way in company with the risen Lord, we might take up the biblical theme of glory. We might ask Him if

there is a place for beauty on the way of salvation. After all, we have a vision ahead of us, that of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:10ff.). Have we the right to adorn the world with some intimations of heavenly beauty, even as we pass through this interim period of space and time? Imagining we were like the actual companions of Christ--Jews who loved to pray in company with their Hebrew sisters and brothers in temple and synagogue--might we not ask Him if the Psalms would ever again be sung in some setting similar to what they had known and revered?

What are we to make of the vision that came to Isaiah in the temple and changed his life (Isa. 6)? Or of Ezekiel, who saw wonderful things, not only in the skies but a vision which nourished his, soul with the exact specifications of a renewed, restored temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 40-48)? An important Russian Orthodox layman, Fedor Dostoevsky, wrote:

Are you aware that mankind can do without the English, that it can also do without Germany, that nothing is easier for mankind to do without than the Russians? That it can live without science, or even bread? Only beauty is absolutely indispensable, for without beauty there is nothing in the world worth doing. Here is the entire secret, all of history

in a nutshell.

Is he right? If so, is there some opportunity--even obligation--for Christians to restore beauty to the world? This is a delicate subject. Even within the Orthodox world a divergence has come about over this issue. About the time when America was being discovered, Russia was divided over the proper manner of expressing Christian faith. Some felt that the Church should demonstrate the glory of the Lord in tangible ways. Was it not beauty of liturgy that captivated the ambassadors of Prince Vladimir as they went about visiting a variety of religious expressions in search of a faith for their people? So it was that the first tendency, more commonly associated with Russian Orthodoxy today, was given a raison d'etre. Majestic temples, elaborate rituals, churches adorned with flowers, candles, incense--all that which may appear to the Anabaptist traditions, distasteful, if not downright abominable--these are meant to celebrate Christ's glory on earth. Beyond that, to possess lands, even for monasteries, and to utilize sound husbanding of resources in order to have something tangible to offer the needy beyond prayers and blessings, to become involved in social programs of education, health and philanthropy, were seen as the supreme means of giving glory to the Holy Trinity. Those who pursued this line were called Possessors, as they justified the Church's duty to serve

God and state in a material way.

Less known were their adversaries, the Non-Possessors or Transvolgans, who lived actually and metaphorically on the other side of Russia's most famous river. They were the intellectuals, people who could rise above the limits of ethnic and nationalistic allegiance. They felt it an encumbrance to become enmeshed with mundane responsibilities. In their view Christians in general and monastics in particular must be free to follow Christ, enlightened in ways of the Spirit that preclude coercion in matters of faith, capable of measuring the state against the demands of the gospel. Neither in architecture nor in ritual, but in simple ways is God to be glorified.⁸

St. Seraphim of Sarov, for example, a renowned elder of nineteenth-century Russia, stood in the tradition of the Transvolgans. He said that the entire purpose of the Christian life is to acquire the Holy Spirit:

They [the priests] tell you: "go to church, observe the commandments, do good. That is the goal of your Christian life." They do not speak as they should have. Prayer, fasting, vigils, and all other Christian works, however excellent they might be, do not in themselves constitute the goal of the Christian life. They are but the indispensable means of attain-

ing that end. The true end of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Spirit of God...of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Orthodox Christianity profited as long as both tendencies functioned in Russia, offering a vigorous, refreshing opportunity for the gospel to be demonstrated in a variety of possibilities. In time, however, the tsar suppressed the Transvolgans in favor of the Possessors, a decision which imposed itself upon all subsequent expressions of Russian Orthodoxy.

We would expect most Anabaptists to favor the Non-Possessors of Russia, excluding, of course, the fact that they were monastics whose theology of deification along with their love of iconography would not sit well with the Protestant theology of justification, or its frequent iconoclasm.

Meeting of Mind and Heart

Continuing with the metaphor of the Emmaus journey, we can see that the inn is still a great way off. As long as we continue in company with the Lord, listening and struggling to comprehend every word, it's possible to make progress. We're on solid ground when we hold fast to a christological approach, for that is what Luke implies: "He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27).

Recall the distinction between synagogue worship and temple sacrifice. We might consider being on the road with Jesus the synagogue aspect of our togetherness, a "liturgy of the Word," a Bible study with the main figure present to help us, through this Heilsgeschichte. Yet there is more than mere learning. Clopas and his companion would later reflect: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (v. 32). The place of the heart in spirituality is where we may find a challenge worth exploring.

One cannot imagine Orthodox spirituality without considering the heart's primacy. For us it is the very principle of unity and stability. To be in constant prayer is to have so stabilized the heart that all distractions are outside. Here is where the Spirit takes up His abode and prays for us with unuttered phrases, where those with pure hearts see God (Mt. 5:8), where one finds a passage to the Kingdom of God. "There is a certain road in particular which leads to the union of humans; it is the heart."⁹ The hesychasts are the "quiet ones" who have shut down the senses and are alert to the mystery of God's union with the person through the heart.

Here is not a place for romanticism or subjectivism, a flight of fantasy for dreamers. In fact, some Protestants among others have criticized the Orthodox for what

they consider a capitulation to hellenistic philosophies. There are indeed those spiritual writers (Origen, for example, and his disciple Evagrius Ponticus¹⁰ who were properly condemned for their philosophical speculations which contradicted the basic presuppositions of biblical Christianity; but the Church in principle has always affirmed a balance between head and heart in the ways of theology.

And we Orthodox would question what appears to us in most Anabaptist traditions to equate mystical illumination with an intellectual understanding of what takes place when God meets the human creature. There is much room here for meeting of minds and hearts, explaining as precisely as possible what transpires when God comes to us in Christ via the Holy Spirit.

There comes a time when our Lord leaves us (though, as He promised, He will never be far from us). Still, we are left to discern through the Holy Spirit the implications of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, reign with the Father, and return. How are we to come to agreement on vital issues that divide us? For example:

(1) What do we know about Him, and how much are we to make of His self-understanding? He was the One who was promised by the prophets. Do we agree with the "high christology" of the Johannine Gospel? Let's assume that we are in accord with the Pauline insights regarding the risen Lord,

which are far too profound and varied for this paper. Let us also take for granted that we are opposed to all extremes of heresy, from the Ebionite sect of Jewish Christians who could envision in Jesus only a role model for everyone, having observed the Law in such detail that He was selected to be Messiah, to the other extreme of the hellenist Docetics who had so low a regard for matter that they felt incarnation of the deity to be loathsome and repugnant. Gnostics in general always follow this latter tendency to deprecate sarx (flesh), a view against which John's writings are aimed.

(2) How do we respond to His love for the world--not only for one another ("A new commandment I give to you, that you love each other," Jn 13:34), nor for humanity in general, but for that earth He promised as an inheritance given to the meek (Mt. 5:5)? It appears to me that many communions among Anabaptist : Protestants share the same criticism heaped upon monastics in both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions: they care more for their own salvation than they do for the welfare of the world.

I would suggest that those who denigrate the Constantinian era, which was until then an inconceivable concept of the known world's conversion to Christ, consider the enormous problem which faced the Church in that era. That questionable "success story" caused some leaders to assume that

nothing worse imaginable could have happened. True martyrdom was all but ended, adequate preparation for baptism was impossible with so many rushing into the Church, and nominalism was all but inevitable. Many serious Christians fled to monastic life in the desert.¹¹ Numerous other solutions have been offered throughout history for ways to preserve the "little flock" from the world and at the same time to take Christ's gospel throughout that fallen creation which the Lord demanded we evangelize.

So how does a Christian live in Christ without abandoning the world He came to save? And how does he or she do so without some compromise with personal spiritual pilgrimage or, better stated without some imitation of the kenotic nature of God as described in Philippians 2:5ff.?

The Meal at the Inn

Now for the most difficult problem of all. if he were going farther" (V8. 28) Why? Because He has something more important to do than to dine with us? Not likely, for He does want to be recognized, and that can be achieved only at table. Because He doesn't want to impose on us, knowing that we are ill prepared to have Him at a common table, since we are unable to take responsibility for hospitality, divided as we are?

We are to be the hosts. What sort of

meal will it be? Not an "agape feast," surely, for that would suggest a compassionate mutual love we have not begun to explore, much less realize. We Orthodox would insist on bringing to the table our children, whom the Anabaptists consider "unbaptized," and at the same time we check all theological credentials by reciting the Nicene Creed and exploring the meaning within it. The meal comes at the end of the spiritual journey, after agreement on Scripture and doctrine.

For us the entire journey to Emmaus has a liturgical meaning. We recall the original eucharistic gatherings of an entire community of several parishes who met at a designated locale and processed to a featured church. They would pray on the way, perhaps to emulate the Jews on their way up to Jerusalem as they sang the Psalms of degrees. Once assembled there would be readings from the Bible and a homily, followed by a prayer for those yet to be baptized as they left the assembly. Those remaining recited the Creed, heard the anaphora summary of the salvation events recounted, then imitated the Last Supper in the presence of the risen Lord.

"He acted as if he were going farther" because He wants to show us that there's much more we have to learn on the way to the Kingdom. It is we who have need of rest for the night. Our limits are not His. Our poor human eyes--so weak and vulnerable!

Recall the brightness of the Transfiguration experience (Mt. 17:2; Mk 9:2), where the brilliance of the glory dazzled the three, and the Gethsemane scenario, when the same three were unable to keep their eyes open for the lateness and the effects of the repast.

He never imposes himself on us. Always the human is free to choose Christ or reject Him. This fearful gift is more than we would desire. Better let Him impose himself on us, we would prefer, since He knows better than we what is good for our salvation. But the dignity of humanity implies that even the Creator will not force us to share His life. True love is like that.

Despite all our differences, now that we have urged Him to remain with us for the meal (which seems to be a eucharistic celebration, since it is clear from the story that Christ himself is president of the assembly), what sort of prayer will we offer to the heavenly Father?

It was Christ who taught us the Lord's Prayer; but how can we in good conscience say together that He whom we both were taught to address as "Abba" is in a real sense "our Father"? Orthodox Christians recite this prayer morning and evening. We use it as a mealtime benediction: "Give us this day our daily bread." In monasteries and churches it is part of the invocations at various special services.

But there is a place par excellence where the Lord's Prayer is located. In the Divine Liturgy, long after the Liturgy of the Word is accomplished, the Creed is recited to separate learners from the baptized and to assure God and humankind that all present are "of one mind and one heart." Then follows the consecration of the sacred gifts that are indeed Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, sitting as it were at the table between the descent of the Holy Spirit and the actual partaking of the Eucharist, present as it were not only in those in the Upper Room but even in Moses and Elijah on the very Transfiguration Mount--the whole Church gathered with Christ, the Church throughout the universe, the Church triumphant and the Church yet to be--it is then that the Church recites as it had originally, or in its present style chants or sings, the Lord's Prayer.

Just before this is done, however, the celebrant says, "Grant, O Lord, that boldly and without condemnation we may dare to call upon You as God the heavenly Father, and to say...." What is the meaning of this phrase? Can it be some oriental expression of humility, a self-effacement before the epitome of all potentates? No, because the children of the imperial one would not be required to treat their parent as though they were servants ("I no longer call you servants," Jn. 15:15).

Then what is this request for a gift of

boldness? Is it some collective shyness, as though the Church is psychologically conditioning itself against the charge of arrogance or of brazen, even impudent, rustic, ill-mannered presumption in the presence of godliness--the attitude we might surmise that Judas Iscariot may have expressed by chastising Jesus over his indulging the woman with the perfume, yet permitting his feet to be washed and so accepting Christ's humility, accepting the choice morsel at the Last Supper and yet betraying the Master? Or can it be the overwhelming experience of Isaiah that year of King Uzziah's death, when he was present at the theophany of the Almighty in the temple, and in his reaction felt his lips to be unclean, living as he did among those with unclean lips, so that a seraph pressed a live coal to his mouth, taking away his guilt and atoning for his sin (Isa. 6:1-7)? This passage helps capture the understanding and focus on the spiritual experience of the Orthodox Church. Here is a verbal expression of the physical obeisance, the deep bow each communicant makes before his or her Creator, touching the forehead to the earth. We bow so low because we rise so high.

Anabaptist and Orthodox, we have much to learn from one another as well as about our traditions since the walk to Emmaus in company with Christ is but a metaphor, and a limited one at that. History has taken us on different paths from the inn. What does

the gospel tell us about returning to Jerusalem, meeting with Peter, John and the others, and what does that suggest as to remaining in the body which is the Church?

ENDNOTES

¹Alexander Schmemmann, For the Life of the World (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Press, 1973).

²Tomas Spidlik, The Spirituality of the Christian East (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986).

³Ibid., p. 22, n. 2.

⁴Louis Bouyer, The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism (New York: Meridian Books, 1964), p. 1394.

⁵Ibid., p. 155.

⁶Spidlik, p.64.

⁷It seems that Melancthon had some thought of salvation as a joint venture between God and humans as they worked towards justification, but one cannot make out just what he was getting at. See his Loci communes, ch. IV.

⁸Nicholas Zernov, Eastern Christendom (New York: Putnam, 1961), p. 142.

⁹Ibid., Spidlik, p. 106, quoting John Climacus, Step 28.

¹⁰John Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology (New York: Fordham University, 1974), p.25.

¹¹Georges Florovsky, "Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert," ch. III in Christianity and Culture, vol. II in his collected works (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1974). Here is an excellent study on the implications of Christian social responsibility and the effects it had upon the early Church.