

3. *An Introduction to Russian Orthodox worship*

The book *Heaven on Earth*, written anonymously by a Russian Orthodox Christian and published in the West, introduces the reader to the life of the Church – to the Liturgy, Bible and to the Church's year.

HEAVEN ON EARTH¹

Introduction (extracts)

(p. 9) Why are outward forms of worship necessary, why do we need a church service? Is it not enough to carry God in our hearts and strive towards Him through all our actions and all our life? Perhaps this really would be enough if modern man were on a higher plane of development. We know that great saints of the Christian faith, who lived in the forests and deserts, often did not attend church services for decades. But who is bold enough to compare himself with them in spiritual perfection?

Those who stand out against external forms of worship forget that man is not only a spiritual being, that he is also accustomed to put all his emotions, experiences and thoughts into outward forms. Our whole life in its most varied aspects is expressed in rituals. The word "ritual" (Russian: *obryad*) comes from "arrange" (*obryadit*), "put into form" (*oblech*). Joy and sorrow, daily greetings, approval, delight, indignation – all these things assume an external form in human life. And even if in those moments when human emotions take on a particular force, this form becomes, so to speak, excessive for ordinary life, yet it constantly accompanies man. What right do we have, therefore, to deprive our feelings towards God of this outward form? What right do we have to reject Christian art and ritual? The words of prayer, the hymns of thanksgiving and repentance which have poured from the hearts of the great mystics, the great poets, the great hymn-writers have their value for us too. To submerge ourselves in them is a training for the soul, an education in the true service of the Eternal. Divine worship leads to the enlightenment, the uplifting of man, it ennoble his soul. Therefore Christianity, which serves God "in spirit and in truth", preserves both ritual and liturgy . . .

(pp. 10-11) . . . Christian worship in the broad sense is called "Liturgy", that is, a common act, common prayer. Christ taught the merit of coming to God in silence, but He also said: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst". The spirit of unity, the spirit of shared experience is the spirit of true churchmanship. The evil of the world lies in division and hatred. The rock of the Church is faith, which cannot exist without love. When a large number of people are inspired by common prayer, there forms around them a mystic spiritual atmosphere which sometimes grips even hardened hearts.

The Liturgy

(pp. 42-43) What happened on Golgotha and in Joseph of Arimathaea's garden did not change the visible order of things. But in the hidden depths of the world it was a turning-point. The gates of Heaven, closed by the fall of man, were opened again. Jesus, the "God-man" (*Bogochelovek*), became the first representa-

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tive of mankind, re-establishing harmony between Heaven and Earth.

But this harmony is not imposed by force from without. It is revealed only to those who accept the Sacrifice and victory of Jesus, by those who find in Him "the way, the truth and the life".

Goglotha – the entry of the "God-man" into a tragic, dark world – remains beyond our comprehension. Only love and faith, only the readiness to partake of it with one's whole being can open for us the meaning of this mystery.

Jesus – representing mankind – victorious over evil, over suffering and death, draws after Him those who love Him. His sacrifice, although it was completed once in Jerusalem, is in essence above time, and it is a sign of our discipleship to participate in it.

On the night before the Crucifixion He spoke to his disciples about participating in this eternal Sacrifice.

Disturbed and confused, wavering between hope and fear, they gathered in the house of His unknown follower. And then He took bread. He broke it, gave thanks, and said the mysterious words: "Take, eat: this is my body, which is given for you . . ." He took the cup: "Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins: do this in remembrance of me."

Those taking part in the Last Supper shared the Bread and the Wine between them; from this night the Sacrifice of the New Covenant is inseparable from the Church. The cup has been uplifted above the world. The centuries pass away like smoke and behind the transparent shroud is the shining visage of Christ with the Cup. The age-old movement of history has no dominion over Him.

When approaching the Eucharistic meal, those who follow Christ "do shew the Lord's death" – as the apostle Paul said, they become partakers of His Sacrifice. Bread and Wine! Everyday human food . . . Those who shared them amongst themselves were somehow joined in one. Again and again Christ is present at this Last Supper. In the Roman catacombs and in a Medieval cathedral, in the centre of a vast city and in a labour camp of death, amidst the polar silence and on the edge of the desert, this sacrifice somehow embraces our planet, rising with the sun and following it from East to West. The earth continues to turn and there is not an hour when the Cup does not shew forth the saving death of the "God-man".

4. *The meaning of an Icon*

The best icons, although hung mostly in museums, continue to influence and inspire many Soviet citizens. "The claim is made for icons that the experience of an icon is the experience of the Kingdom of Heaven; there is direct involvement with what is portrayed" (*Sobornost*, No. 6, p. 398) and some find faith through them. The theological meaning of Rublev's great icon, the Holy Trinity, was the subject of an article from which we print a small extract.