

The Attractions of Orthodoxy

by Jim Forest

"Tradition is democracy extended through time, a suffrage so universal that it includes not only the living but the dead… Tradition gives the vote not only to ourselves but to our ancestors."

Reading these words by G.K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* in 1960, when I was new to Christianity and gradually becoming a Catholic, I rejoiced at the realization that an ancient Church was as exciting as an ancient forest. Raised in a culture that worshipped newness and youth, I was beginning to appreciate those mystical explorers who went before me, mapping the geography of spiritual life, choreographing ritual, creating religious art and music.

In those days the Catholic liturgy was in many respects as it had been for centuries. While Low Mass was typically a quiet babble of hurriedly whispered prayer at which the congregation was a silent choir of witnesses, High Mass was often a revelation of beauty: priests celebrating in elaborate eucharistic vestments which had their origins in the clothing of imperial Rome, clouds of intoxicating incense rising from brass censers swinging with sleigh-bell sounds, whole congregations responding in Latin, choirs singing Gregorian chant that blew away modern music. Such Masses had the taste of eternity: the rituals so radically out of fashion that the curtains were lifted between past and present. Many received communion, though it was by no means automatic. Confession was a significant element of preparation and was often a healing experience.

Unfortunately Mass wasn't always that good. Many priests went through the motions with occasional glances at their watches. The decay religious art had suffered in recent centuries scarred many churches, undermining the Liturgy. In many parishes, communion lines were short and the confessional a place in which condemnation outweighed forgiveness.

Remembering the old Liturgy and its environment at its worst rather than its best, I joined in the general chorus of approval when the changes instituted by the Second Vatican Council were introduced. At last Catholicism had arrived in the modern world. The words "new" and "improved" had been stamped not only on boxes of detergent but even on the Mass. In the decade following, I gradually became part of a new Catholic sub-culture that pushed liturgical experimentation still further, adding and subtracting from the ritual and calendar as if playing with a box of Legos.

Now a quarter century has passed. Several years ago I became Orthodox, joining a section of the universal Church in which there has been no substantial change in liturgical practice in centuries. Even the few areas of change are of a kind that has to do with tradition — such as each Orthodox Church building its Liturgy on the local language. But whether among Eskimos on the Aleutian islands in Alaska, Ugandans in central Africa, or Buryats beyond Lake Baikal in Siberia, the ritual is everywhere the same as it was a millennium ago.

What led me and so many others in recent years to make our religious home in a section of Christianity that many still regard as a kind of museum?

Time

Orthodoxy is generous with time. An hour is never enough for collective worship. An hour-and-a-half to two hours is common; in Russia it can stretch to three hours. On Easter, six hours is normal, from before midnight until dawn. To the uninitiated, so many hours in church is torture. But to those who have escaped the fast-lane, such unhurriedness is bliss. It is much the same with public prayer as with a good meal in which the cooking and eating take hours. In Orthodoxy there is no "fast food," no Macdonalds liturgy. Litanies, several of them very much the same, are sung — everything is sung — in a most inefficient way, while we endlessly sing back, "Lord, have mercy." Why so much repetition? For the same reason that we are so inefficient in other crucial actions: eating, love-making, long walks — all those preferred activities in which the same actions and motions are repeated over and over again.

The time one enters in Orthodoxy doesn't tick. It used to be I would glance at my watch, but as months and then years passed, the strangeness became less strange, my preoccupation with keeping track of time evaporated. Time in church became something like time walking along the banks of a stream in the mountains.

Orthodox time isn't box-shaped. We are used to events that start at precise moments, "on time," going on as a light switch goes on and maintaining a certain steady velocity, and then, again "on time," go off with an almost audible click. In Orthodoxy the Liturgy starts when confessions end and never on time. The transition into the Liturgy is like the rising of a wave or the slowly intensifying light of dawn. The Liturgy ends in a similar way, the time varying, the wave receding.

The re-integration of spiritual and physical activity

We live in a society in which in the connection between physical and spiritual activity is often cut, not least in church. Our spiritual life is often all in the head. Our bodies seem paralyzed.

In both east and west, there used to be neither chairs nor pews in church. The main posture of prayer was to stand. In the west, chairs were introduced. Chair-makers haven't done nearly so well in the east. "Wisdom! Attend!" the deacon sings out periodically during the Orthodox Liturgy. Standing helps one remain attentive. Standing is also freer — one isn't boxed in. Once you get used to it, it is a release from prison for children and better for adults, though there are a few benches for those who need them as well as the freedom to wander outside the church for fresh air or a moment of rest. (Seven years ago, when I sought a bishop's blessing for a book I wanted to write about the Russian Orthodox Church, he warned me that I would have to do much more standing than Americans are used to: "The first hour is difficult, the second hour painful, but if you last until the third hour, God will give you wings." It has turned out that sometimes I get those wings, other times not. In any event I now find myself much preferring standing to sitting when I pray.)

The body language of Orthodoxy includes much use of the sign of the cross, a wordless amen that accompanies not only doxologies to the Holy Trinity but many other prayers. Often a small bow is combined with the action, a small but significant physical gesture of inner reverence.

The physical activities that accompany prayer are numerous. The light that illumines both icons and the church comes not from electric lamps but candles, each flame representing an act of prayer. The icons themselves are not only looked at but kissed. Occasionally the gesture is combined with touching the ground or floor — a reminder that the feet of Christ walked on this earth. If there is enough room it is customary (except during the season of Easter) for believers to prostrate themselves before the gifts on the altar after the consecration. The cross held by the priest during the final blessing is kissed by everyone.

Again and again, every bridge of the senses is used: the breathing in of incense, icons, candlelight and radiant eucharistic vestments for the eyes, constant singing for the ears.

Preparation for communion

When I started visiting churches in Russia, I was surprised that so few people received communion. I assumed the Russian Church was in the same benighted condition that had afflicted Catholicism until Pope Pius X began the long process of restoring the laity to full participation in the Eucharist. It took several years before I came to realize that the short communion lines in Russian churches did not necessarily prove that the iconostasis was a Berlin Wall between the altar and ordinary believers. Rather I became aware that many Orthodox people spend weeks, sometimes months, approaching the chalice. Confession, intensified prayer, attendance at Vespers the evening before receiving communion — these are frequent elements in Orthodox eucharistic life. Barring health requirements, there is a strict fast in the hours proceeding communion. (Exceptions occur. Earlier this year, on the Feast of the Holy Trinity, I was present at the first Liturgy celebrated at Akademgorodok near Novosibirsk in Siberia. Akademgorodok was a churchless town that was founded in the fifties by the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In no Russian town is there a higher proportion of people with graduate degrees. Despite the fact that the event was out of doors and under heavy rain, with only the altar protected by a temporary shelter, hundreds took part in the lengthy service. The atmosphere of the Liturgy was so extraordinary that, by the time of communion, many approached the chalice even though they had not prepared for it. Chalice in hand, the celebrant heard their confessions one by one, each confession ending in communion. It was a day when many who had once been baptized but had long been estranged from the Church returned to sacramental life. Many tears - tears of both repentance and joy — were mixed with the rain.)

Repentance and forgiveness

To attempt union with Christ while refusing to be reconciled with others is to turn the Eucharist into a sacrament of disconnection. Response to Jesus's demand that one must be reconciled with others before approaching the altar (Mt 5:23) has profoundly influenced Orthodox sacramental life. Especially on Saturday nights after Vespers and Sunday mornings before the Liturgy, there will be many coming to confession. This occurs not in a confessional closet but in the front of the church, with the priest and penitent standing side by side in front of a Gospel book and cross and usually before the icon on the Mother of God and the Christ child. Often the priest will quietly whisper the Jesus prayer as he listens. Typically, the content of confession is shaped by the Sermon on the Mount, the opening verses of which are known by heart to Orthodox believers as the Beatitudes (seen as a summary of Jesus's teaching) are sung during Liturgy when the Gospel book is carried in procession through the congregation.

In the Russian Church, there is a remarkable event that follows the Liturgy on the Sunday before Lent begins. Standing before the congregation, the priest confesses his sins as pastor and begs the forgiveness of those present. If he is married, as is usually the case, the first to approach him after the deacon is his wife. His confession continues privately. She forgives him and then confesses privately to him, receiving his forgiveness. One by one each member of the church

comes to the pastor, and then to every other member of the church, continuing the process of confession and forgiveness. Forgiveness Sunday, as it is called, is one of the immense treasures of Russian Christianity, profoundly shaping the Lenten pilgrimage toward Easter, and at the same time healing many wounds that have accumulated during the year in each parish. May Forgiveness Sunday one day become a practice throughout the Church.

The place of children

One of the remarkable sayings of Jesus was that his adult disciples should not impede children who wanted to come to him: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them." I came to appreciate this teaching more and more as I struggled to explain to my young children why they were not allowed to receive communion in the several Catholic parishes we attended before being absorbed into Orthodoxy. How upset, in one case how angry, they were to be excluded from communion during the early years of their lives. Only in the past decade did I come to realize that this custom of western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, is of late origin, revealing our western preoccupation with achieving the "age of reason." But Christianity is not only for the articulate, the intelligent, the educated, but also for the newborn, the senile, the slow and forever childlike members of society. (Perhaps one could say that Orthodoxy is itself a retarded form of Christianity, that is slow, not in a hurry, dramatically failing to keep up with the times.) In an Orthodox church children, even very young ones, have a particularly privileged place. More important, they may be the only weekly communicants. The Church sees them as not yet having become enemies to themselves, unlike those of us who have clearly reached the age of reason.

A climate of compassion

Sometimes I describe Orthodoxy and Catholicism as being like similar highways except that the Orthodox road is without police cars. Oddly enough, the Orthodox traffic moves slower despite the absence of police. It is a difference less in doctrine and ecclesiastical structure (Orthodoxy lacks a Holy Office) than climate. The climate of Orthodoxy has about it the sweet smell of God's mercy.

One sees this in areas where precept is similar but pastoral practice different. Like Catholicism, Orthodoxy emphasizes marriage as an indissoluble sacramental union, yet the Church will bless second and even third marriages. Nor does the process require a remote bureaucratic mechanism resulting in an annulment sealed in Rome but occurs in the intimate pastoral framework of the parish and diocese.

Conciliarity

The western word for the central church of a diocese is cathedral, from the Latin word for chair: literally the place where the bishop sits. In Russian the equivalent word is sobor, from the word for council. The cathedral's decisive function is to provide a place for councils. At council the bishop presides but does not rule. Just as the Holy Spirit at Pentecost descended on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, so does the Holy Spirit speak to the Church not through individual bishops or even through assemblies of clerics but through Councils where representatives of the Church — both clerical and lay — are gathered together. No bishop in Orthodoxy, including the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, has an authority similar to that which was gradually acquired by the Bishop of Rome. While Orthodoxy is quite willing to concede to the Peter's heir the highest place of honor, it sees no bishop as having a role similar to that of a monarch or autocrat. Rather it sees its bishops as members of the community of believers who have special pastoral tasks but who are not uniquely equipped to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The masculine-feminine balance

While every Church, like every society, is scarred by male chauvinism, I find a better balance between the masculine-feminine polarities in Orthodoxy. This is so despite the fact that men and women are not seen as playing interchangeable parts. Perhaps it has to do with conciliarity; both men and women participate in Church Councils. Perhaps it is because the great majority of pastors are (as were the Apostles) married: celibacy is revered but isn't a pre-condition for priesthood. There is also the fact that women normally play crucial roles in parish leadership. Perhaps the difference also is influenced by devotion to Mary, the Theotokos, the God-bearer, whose icons and feast-days shine so brightly in Orthodox life.

Restoring western Christianity

Despite the many heavy blows that have been suffered in the Orthodox world, the eastern Church has experienced much less division than occurred within western Christianity. There was no Reformation or Counter-Reformation nor further splintering of churches that eventually estranged so many from the Church in all its segments, so many of which seemed as merciless as sword-wielding armies.

The division of the eastern and western Church occurred so many centuries ago that the eastern Church was nearly forgotten in the west. Time passed. Our western churches changed dramatically, not necessarily for the better. Now we are in the early decades of the rediscovery of our relatives, fellow members of the Body of Christ who at first may

impress us as being living relics. Yet now they are beginning to open certain doors of renewal for us as we struggle to overcome the aridity we often suffer within the western Church. Increasingly we place reproductions of Orthodox icons in our parishes and homes and learn not to look at these as primitive paintings but rather as places in which we can pray more easily. Gradually we are discovering that, in doing this, we have not so much gone east but rather gone deeper into our own tradition. What we find in the east we find in the west, except that in the west it has been buried, like good frescoes which were painted over by poor frescoes until we were so appalled at the graceless art on the walls that we only wanted to paint the corrupted walls white. Now what was lost or plastered over begins to come back to life. It is a kind of Easter that promises much for Christianity in both east and west. An ancient estrangement is ending.

Pope John Paul II has said that he will consider his papacy to have failed if, by the year 2000, the eastern and western churches remain divided. What a joy it would be if, during the first Easter of the coming Millennium, we Christians could sing with one voice and one heart the Resurrection hymn, "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life."