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Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev: Orthodox Worship as a School of Theology

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*All of our liturgical hymns are instructive, profound and sublime.
They contain the whole of our theology and moral teaching,
give us Christian consolation and instill in us a fear of the Judgment.
He who listens to them attentively has no need of other books on the Faith.
St Theophan the Recluse*

In this lecture I would like to share with you some thoughts that I have been gathering over my more than 20 years' participation in Orthodox divine services, both in Russia and abroad. What I have to say will be addressed primarily to ordained ministers and to future clergymen more than to lay people, since I scarcely have any recollections of myself as a layman, and all of my conscious church life has been connected with serving the altar.

As a fifteen-year old boy I first entered the sanctuary of the Lord, the Holy of Holies of the Orthodox Church, and from that time became an active participant in the divine services. Although I had regularly attended church beforehand, listened to the words of the services, confessed, and received Holy Communion, it was only after my entrance into the altar that the *theourgia*, the mystery, and "feast of faith" began, which continues to this very day. After my ordination, I saw my destiny and main calling in serving the Divine Liturgy. Indeed, everything else, such as sermons, pastoral care and theological scholarship

were centered around the main focal point of my life – the Liturgy.

The school of Orthodox theology that formed my theological thinking was not so much a theological seminary, academy or university but the Liturgy and other services. The liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church penetrated my mind and heart so deeply that they became, along with the Gospel and the writings of the church Fathers, the main criteria of theological truth, an inexhaustible source of knowledge about God, Christ, the world, Church and salvation.

Orthodox divine services are a priceless treasure that we must carefully guard. Similar services were once celebrated in other Christian communities, but over the centuries they were lost as a result of both liturgical and theological reforms.

I have had the opportunity to be present at both Protestant and Catholic services, which were, with rare exceptions, quite disappointing. Protestant services as a rule are comprised of a series of isolated, incoherent prayerful actions. At first the officiating clergyman (or clergywoman) says a benediction, then everybody opens a hymnal to a certain page and begins to sing. After a pause the clergyman reads a passage from Scripture, then gives a sermon, followed by communal singing, organ playing, etc. The congregation is usually seated, now and then standing in order to sit down again after some time. The services are interspersed with explanations by the clergy, who tell their congregation in which hymnal and on which page a certain hymn is to be found, and whether they should sing it while standing or remaining seated. Such services do not normally last longer than thirty or forty minutes, and in certain parishes even rock music is used, to which the parishioners dance.

One can add that after the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, services in some Catholic churches have become little different from Protestant ones. They often share the same lack of wholeness and the same alternation of incoherent, unrelated prayers and hymns.

The liturgical texts used in many non-Orthodox churches, except for the Eucharistic prayers and certain ancient hymns still in use, are often characterized by a low level of theological content: as a rule they contain much “piety” that often borders on the sentimental, and very little theology.

Orthodox divine services, whether it be the Liturgy, vespers, matins, hours, nocturnes or compline, are a totally different matter. From the priest’s exclamation at the very beginning of the service we are immersed in an atmosphere of uninterrupted prayer, in which psalms, litanies, stichera, troparia, prayers and the celebrating priest’s invocations follow one another in a continuous stream. The entire service is conducted as if in one breath, in one rhythm, like an ever unfolding mystery in which nothing distracts from prayer. Byzantine liturgical texts filled with profound theological and mystical content, alternate with the prayerful incantation of the psalms, whose every word resonates in the hearts of the faithful. Even the elements of “choreography” characteristic of Orthodox services, such as solemn entries and exits, prostrations and censing, are not intended to distract from prayer but, on the contrary, to put the faithful in a prayerful disposition and draw them into the

theourgia in which, according to the teaching of the Fathers, not only the Church on earth, but also the heavenly Church and even the angels participate.

Liturgical texts as a school of theology

May I now turn to the theological and dogmatic significance of liturgical texts. In my view, liturgical texts are for Orthodox Christians an incontestable doctrinal authority, whose theological irreproachability is second only to Scripture. Liturgical texts are not simply the works of outstanding theologians and poets, but also the fruits of the prayerful experience of those who have attained sanctity and *theosis*. The theological authority of liturgical texts is, in my opinion, even higher than that of the works of the Fathers of the Church, for not everything in the works of the latter is of equal theological value and not everything has been accepted by the fullness of the Church. Liturgical texts, on the other hand, have been accepted by the whole Church as a “rule of faith” (*kanon pisteos*), for they have been read and sung everywhere in Orthodox churches over many centuries. Throughout this time, any erroneous ideas foreign to Orthodoxy that might have crept in either through misunderstanding or oversight were eliminated by Church Tradition itself, leaving only pure and authoritative doctrine clothed by the poetic forms of the Church’s hymns.

This holds true above all for the daily cycle of services prescribed by the Orthodox Typicon, as well as for the weekly and yearly cycle found in the Octoechos, Lenten Triodion, Pentecostarion and Menaia, whose liturgical texts contain interpretations of and reflections on many episodes from the life of Christ and aspects of His teaching. In this sense one can say that liturgical texts are a “Gospel according to the Church”. During the ecclesiastical year, from the Nativity to the Ascension, the earthly life of Christ passes by the spiritual gaze of the faithful. Liturgical texts bring us close to Christ at His birth in Bethlehem, on Mount Tabor when He was transfigured, in the upper room on Zion during the Last Supper and on Calvary with the Crucifixion.

Liturgical texts are not simply a commentary on the Gospels since, in many cases, they speak of that which the Gospels pass over in silence. I would like to give an example from the Nativity service. The Gospel reading speaks very briefly of Christ’s birth: “The birth of Christ was thus: after His Mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting everybody to know of this, wanted to let her go secretly” (Mt. 1:18-19). Much that happened at this event has remained hidden from us. For example, the narrative is silent about Joseph’s personal drama: we can only guess about his feelings and doubts, as well as about the words he uttered to his betrothed when he learned of her pregnancy. Orthodox liturgical texts attempt to recreate in poetic form a dialogue between Joseph and Mary:

Joseph says to the Virgin: Mary, what is this that I see in Thee? I am at a loss, astonished and horrified. Mary, what is this that I see in Thee? Thou hast brought me shame instead of honour, sorrow instead of rejoicing, reproach instead of boasting. No longer shall I endure the reproach of men, for I received thee blameless from the priest of the Lord’s temple, and what is this

that I see?

When Joseph, O Virgin, was wounded by sorrow while going to Bethlehem, Thou didst cry unto him: why art Thou languishing in sorrow and confused, not knowing that all that has happened to me is part of the fearful mystery? But now lay aside all fear, knowing of the most glorious events, for in His mercy God hast descended to earth and is now in my womb, taking on flesh. When thou shalt see Him born, as He has willed, thou shalt be filled with joy and worship Him as thy Creator.

One may refer to such texts as “poetic invention” or “church rhetoric”, or one may see in them something more – a perceptive understanding of the feelings and experiences of those whose lives form Sacred History. Byzantine hymnographers made use of an extremely rich array of literary techniques since they spoke about that which ‘the eye has not beheld, the ear has not heard and has not entered the heart of man’ (1 Cor. 2:9), about mysteries beyond the limits of human reason, but grasped only by faith. There are many mystical truths in Christianity which, being difficult to explain in prose, are better served by poetry to help the faithful to understand.

Another example can be found in the liturgical texts describing Christ’s descent into hell. The Gospels say nothing directly about this event; it is only briefly mentioned in the First Epistle of Peter (1 Pet. 3:18-21; 4:6). In the ancient Church, however, a belief in Christ’s descent into hell was very strong and is reflected, for example, in many apocryphal writings, such as the “Gospel according to Bartholomew” and the “Gospel according to Nicodemus”. From early Christian literary sources references to the Descent later entered the hymns of Saints Ephraim the Syrian and Romanos the Melodist, and from there into the service books of the Orthodox Church. Many texts in the Octoechos, Lenten Triodion and Pentecostation are devoted to this subject.

The liturgical texts for Great Saturday are especially remarkable in this respect for their ability to grasp the theological significance of events. The focal point in matins on Great Saturday is the reading of verses from Psalm 117/118 with the addition of “praises” to each verse (these were written by an anonymous author before the end of the fourteenth century). The “praises” have several main themes, among which is the Son of God’s suffering and death (repeatedly referred to as “voluntary”) in fulfillment of the will of the Father who sent Him for the salvation of the world. They also speak especially of the Theotokos, who stood by the cross of Christ and wept for Him. Some of the “praises” are addressed to the Mother of God and Joseph of Arimathea, while others are written on behalf of the Theotokos and directed to Jesus. In some texts the author addresses Judas and accuses him of treachery, while in others he derides the Jews, who did not accept their Messiah but gave Him over to a shameful death.

The central theme of the “praises”, however, is about the redemption and salvation of humankind by Christ, who descended into Hades. Having searched for fallen Adam on earth but not having found him there, the Incarnate God descended into the depths of hell in order to redeem him. As in many hymns from the Octoechos, here too the universal character of redemption by Christ is stressed. These “praises” sing of Christ’s resurrecting the dead, an event described as a “harrowing” of hell:

My Jesus Christ, King of all, what hast Thou come searching for in hell? Or hast Thou come to renounce mankind?

How doth hell endure, O Saviour, Thy coming, and is not sorrowed and pained, blinded by the dawning of Thy glory?

Thou hast descended to earth to save Adam, and not finding him there, O Master, Thou hast descended into Hades in search of him.

As a grain of wheat entering the depths of the earth, Thou hast brought forth many rich ears of wheat by raising mankind descended from Adam.

Though Thou art buried, Though Thou descendeth into hell, Thou hast emptied the graves and devastated Hades, O Christ.

In obedience, O Word, to Thy Father, Thou hast descended even unto fearful Hades, and hast resurrected mankind.

Hell was horrified, O Saviour, seeing Thee, the Life-giver, laying waste to its riches and raising those dead from the ages.

Another important text from Great Saturday, more ancient than the “praises”, is a canon written by several authors of the 8-10th centuries. Its troparia, addressed to the buried and risen Son of God, refer to the devastation of hell by Christ’s descent and the annihilation of its power over people. These themes are expressed with singular eloquence:

Hades reigns over mankind, but not eternally, for Thou wast placed in the grave voluntarily, and by Thy life-giving Hand Thou hast broken the keys of death and preached to those asleep from the ages, being the unfailing deliverance and first-born of the dead.

Hades was wounded, receiving into its bosom Him who was wounded in the side by a spear, and sighs, being overwhelmed by the divine fire, for our salvation who sing: blessed art Thou, O God our deliverer.

Let creation be glad and let all the earth-born rejoice, for the enemy, hell, has been captured; let the women meet Me with myrrh, for I have delivered Adam and Eve, the ancestors of the human race, and on the third day shall rise from the dead.

The significance of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice is recalled in the Synaxarion, compiled around the fourteenth century and which, as it were, summarizes the theological content of Great Saturday’s liturgical hymns:

On Holy and Great Saturday we commemorate the burial of the divine body and descent into hell of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, through which mankind was raised from corruption and entered eternal life...The Word of God descends into the grave in the flesh, then descends into hell with His incorrupt and divine soul, separated from the body by

death and committed to the hands of the Father, to Whom He offered His blood, our redemption, even though He did not ask for it. For the Lord's soul was not held by Hades, as the souls of other saints... Our enemy the devil was not captured by the blood through which we were redeemed, even though he held us captive. For how could the robber, the devil, hold captive not only Him who was sent by God, but also God Himself? Our Lord Jesus Christ courageously descended into the grave with His body, having thoroughly taken on flesh. He was with the thief in Paradise, and in Hades, as it is said, with His divine soul. He was also with the Father in a supernatural manner, seated together with the Spirit as ineffable God, and was everywhere, not suffering in His divinity either in the grave or on the cross. The Lord's body endured corruption, the separation of the soul from the body, but in no way did He suffer decay, that is, the decomposition of flesh in its members... Hades was then overcome with awe, sensing His might, and after a short while spat out both Him who was swallowed unjustly – Christ, the mighty cornerstone, – and those who were held in its belly from the ages.

The central theme of this text is the doctrine of redemption, expressed here in terms similar to those found in the theologians of the 3rd and 4th centuries. In the third century, Origen maintained that the Son of God on the cross committed His spirit to the hands of the Father and gave His soul to the devil as a ransom for mankind: “To whom did the Redeemer give His soul as a ransom for many? Not to God. Why then to the devil? The soul of the Son of God, and not His spirit, was given as a ransom for us, since He had already delivered the latter to His Father with the words: ‘Father, into Thy hands I deliver my spirit’ (Lk. 23:66); and not His body, since we find no indication of this in the Scriptures”. However, St Gregory Nazianzen contested such an understanding of the redemption: “To whom and why was such a price paid? If to the evil one, what an insult! The robber receives a ransom, receives it not only from God, but God Himself!” It is precisely these words of St Gregory that are quoted by the author of the Synaxarion.

Another thought expounded in the Synaxarion is that Christ's body, being subject to corruption (*phthora*), did not undergo decomposition” (*diaphthora*). This terminological antithesis was introduced by St John of Damascus to counteract the teaching of the apthartodocetists on the incorruption of Christ's flesh.

Lastly, the notion of Hades being “deceived” during Christ's descent is developed in the Synaxarion. This idea, also reflected in St John Chrysostom's Paschal homily, goes back to St Gregory of Nyssa's theory of how God deceived the devil, having hidden the “hook” of His divinity under the guise of His human nature. By swallowing the bait, Hades also swallowed the “hook” that destroyed it from within. If this image in Gregory of Nyssa's exposition seems somewhat artificial or forced, it is expressed quite convincingly in the liturgical texts, since they speak not of how God “deceived” the devil, but rather how the devil “was deceived”, taking Christ for an ordinary person.

We can see, therefore, that the liturgical texts of Great Saturday speak not only of an event that was not mentioned in the Gospels, but also offer a profound theological understanding of it. The terse, laconic verses of the liturgical texts contain a synthesis of ideas that were the subject of whole theological treatises over many centuries.

It would be possible to show many other examples, but I think that the above are enough to demonstrate the exceptional significance of the Church's liturgical texts for the Orthodox Christian. Through them participation in the services becomes not just a school of prayer, but also a school of theology, a meditation on and a knowledge of God.

Is a revision of liturgical texts possible?

Several years ago I came across a short article in a journal of the Coptic Church where it stated that this Church had decided to remove prayers for those held in hell from its service books, since these prayers "contradict Orthodox teaching". Puzzled by this article, I decided to ask a representative of the Coptic Church about the reasons for this move. Recently I had the possibility to do so, and a Coptic Metropolitan replied that the decision was made by his Synod because, according their official doctrine, no prayers can help those in hell. I told the metropolitan that in the liturgical practice of the Russian Orthodox Church and other local Orthodox Churches there are prayers for those held in hell, and that we believe in their saving power. This surprised the Metropolitan, and he promised to study this question in more detail.

During this conversation with the Metropolitan I expressed my thoughts on how one could go very far and even lose important doctrinal teachings in the pursuit of correcting liturgical texts. Orthodox liturgical texts are important because of their ability to give exact criteria of theological truth, and one must always confirm theology using liturgical texts as a guideline, and not the other way round. The *lex credendi* grows out of the *lex orandi*, and dogmas are considered divinely revealed because they are born in the life of prayer and revealed to the Church through its divine services. Thus, if there are differences in the understanding of a dogma between a certain theological authority and liturgical texts, I would be inclined to give preference to the latter. And if a textbook of dogmatic theology contains views different from those found in liturgical texts, it is the textbook, not the liturgical texts, that need correction.

Even more inadmissible, from my point of view, is the correction of liturgical texts in line with contemporary norms. Many Protestant congregations have already gone a long way in such efforts. Recently, however, several members of the Orthodox Church in the West have also begun to propagate the idea of revising orthodox services in order to bring them closer to contemporary standards of political correctness. For example, Archpriest Serge Hackel, an active participant in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, has proposed the removal of all texts from the Holy Week services that speak of the guilt of the Jews in the death of Christ (cf. his article *How Western Theology after Auschwitz corresponds to the consciousness and services of the Russian Orthodox Church, in Theology after Auschwitz and its Relation to Theology after the Gulag: Consequences and Conclusions*, Saint-Petersburg, 1999). The twelfth antiphon from the matins of Great Friday is a cause of Fr Hackel's special concern:

Thus says the Lord to the Jews: 'O My people, what have I done unto thee? Or wherein have I wearied thee? I gave light to thy blind and cleansed thy lepers, I raised up the man who laid upon his bed. O My people, what have I done unto thee, and how hast thou repaid Me? Instead of manna thou has given me gall, instead of water vinegar; instead of loving Me, thou hast

nailed Me to the Cross. I can endure no more. I shall call My gentiles and they shall glorify Me with the Father and the Spirit, and I shall bestow on them eternal life.

Fr Hackel calls this text a “shameless invention” that should be removed from the services: “It is thought that such a service as the matins of Great Friday was compiled according to the teaching of the Church, since the *lex orandi* is the *lex credendi*. But the authority of this service is based solely on the fact that it has existed for many centuries. It was not confirmed at any Ecumenical Council and does not need one in order to be revised or, if necessary, removed. But nothing has been done until now, and we still continue to participate in these services just as before”. In his parish in southern London, Fr Hakkel has already “performed surgery”, as he puts it, and “removed anti-semitism from the ambo”.

Not limiting himself to calling for the revision of liturgical tradition, Fr Hackel questions early Christian texts that speak of the guilt of the Jews, including those found in the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles and writings of the church Fathers, in the treachery against Christ. In the Gospel according to John, he notes that the word “Jew” is mentioned 70 times, carrying a negative connotation in half of the cases, while the Book of Acts frequently describes how the Jews crucified Christ (2:23, 3:13-15; 4:10; 10:39). A “superficial and selective” reading of the Scriptures brings the reader to the conclusion that the Jews crucified Christ, claims Fr Hackel. However, he further states, the important role of Pontius Pilate and the Roman administration in Jesus’ condemnation is neglected: if such a thing happened, it is they who would be responsible for the sentencing and crucifixion not just of a particular prisoner, but of all prisoners.

According to Fr Hackel, every passage in the New Testament that mentions the guilt of the Jews in Jesus’ death is a result of “the influence that polemics and discord in first century society exerted on the writing and editing of sacred texts”. He argues that “earlier it was thought that the Christian Church was the New Israel that succeeded the Old Israel”. Such a view is characteristic of several church Fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom. It would be possible to ignore their teaching, states Fr Hackel, “but unfortunately there exists in many Church circles a false notion that one should show great respect to the works of the Holy Fathers despite the obvious shortcomings of some of their writings”.

The quotations above from Fr Hakkel’s article are revealing examples of how a distortion of the *lex credendi* inevitably leads to “corrections” in the *lex orandi*. This is not only a question of revising liturgical tradition, but also a re-examination of all Christian history and doctrinal Tradition. The main theme of all four Gospels is the conflict between Christ and the Jews, who in the end demanded the death penalty for Jesus. Pilate said of Christ that “I find no guilt in this man” (Jn. 19:4), and washed his hands as a sign of disagreement with the accusations against Jesus, while the Jews shouted “May his blood be upon us and our children” (Mt. 27:25). There was no conflict between Christ and the Roman administration, the latter being involved only because the Jews did not have the right to carry out a death penalty. It seems that all of this is so obvious that it does not need any explanation. This is exactly how the ancient Church understood the Gospel story, and this is the understanding that is reflected in liturgical texts. However, contemporary rules of “political correctness” demand another interpretation. Here we can see the beginning of a watering down of Church doctrine, whose goal is to bring not only the Church’s services, but the

Christian faith itself in line with contemporary trends.

I do not want to create the impression that I am an opponent of the theological dialogue between Christians and Jews. Such a dialogue, in my opinion, is necessary just like other interfaith dialogues. However, it is necessary to follow one cardinal rule both in interfaith and inter-Christian dialogue: each party must clearly articulate its position and not attempt to adapt it to the other side. Moreover, each participant should be obliged to express not his own personal opinions, but the position of his Church or religious organization, otherwise the dialogue turns into an exchange of personal opinions. The aim of interfaith and inter-Christian dialogues is not to blur the lines of one's doctrine in order to reach a compromise, but to strive in understanding and accepting others just as they are. The services of each tradition, be it Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, or any other, are the most authentic expressions of its doctrinal foundations. Dialogue may only touch upon the interpretation of certain liturgical texts, but must not lead to their alteration.

Services especially adapted to various categories of believers have existed for a long time in Protestant congregations in the West. For example, there are feminist services with their own specific texts. I have had the opportunity to be present at such a service, which the congregation began with a prayer to “the God of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel”. This was followed by talk of God as a Mother with a female minister reading excerpts from early Christian writers, particularly Tertullian, that speak of women disparagingly. The reason for this reading was to demonstrate that the ancient Church was imperfect and therefore should not be regarded as a criterion of truth. The service ended with a call to fight for women's rights to ordination. In this case, the *lex orandi* fully corresponded to the *lex credendi*, but the *lex credendi* itself was obviously a result of serious “surgery” on the very heart of Christian Tradition, carried out not from inside the church community, but from the outside, by a secular world which has given rise to the feminist movement.

It is my belief that the Orthodox Tradition is safeguarded from such occurrences, since it possesses a sufficient number of “defense mechanisms” that prevent foreign elements from penetrating into its liturgical practice. I have in mind those mechanisms that were set in motion when erroneous or heretical opinions were introduced into the liturgical texts under the pretext of revision. One may recall how Nestorianism began with the suggestion to replace the widely-used term “Theotokos” (Mother of God) with “Christotokos” (Mother of Christ), the latter was seen as more appropriate by Nestorius. When this suggestion was made, one of the defense mechanisms was activated: the Orthodox people were indignant and protested. Later, another mechanism was put into operation when theologians met to discuss the problem. Finally, an Ecumenical Council was convened. Thus, it turned out that a dangerous Christological heresy, lurking under the guise of a seemingly harmless liturgical introduction, was later condemned by a Council.

“Canonical” and “uncanonical” services

All that has been said so far about the theological authority of liturgical texts relates to those found in the daily, weekly and annual cycle of services in the Service Book, the Book of Hours, the Octoechos, the Lenten Triodion, the Pentecostarion and

the Menaia. Unfortunately, however, the contents of these books are not always accessible to the average Orthodox believer for several reasons. First of all, the majority of these services are not celebrated in churches that do not have daily services, and even in those that do, they are abbreviated (the Synaxarion, for example, is left out almost everywhere). Secondly, liturgical texts are read and sung in Church Slavonic, which not everyone can understand. Thirdly, many hymns are sung in church only once or a few times during the year, and are difficult to understand when heard, even if one knows Church Slavonic. Fourthly, Orthodox liturgical texts are essentially works of Byzantine liturgical poetry translated into Slavonic many centuries ago, and are therefore quite difficult to understand without a knowledge of the original language or the rules of Byzantine poetics. Even if all liturgical texts were to be translated into Russian they would hardly become immediately understandable to everybody.

The only way to explore the riches of the Orthodox Church's liturgical poetry is to study the texts systematically, just as one studies music, mathematics and other subjects. There are several ways to do this. One is to go to church every day and follow the service books as they are read and sung. Another is to read and sing in a choir. The third is to read liturgical books at home, and still another is to study Greek and Slavonic and compare the original text with the Slavonic translation.

But are such luxuries available to most Orthodox Christians? Of course, not. Typically, the majority are content with what they manage to understand during the services. Or, they try to make up for the lack of spiritual nourishment in church by resorting to various "uncanonical" services and prayers not contained in the Church's prescribed liturgical books mentioned above. These other services and prayers include *molebens* and *akathists* that have entered our church practice over the past two or three centuries and are very popular among believers. Unlike the Byzantine hymns that are difficult to understand, these molebens and akathists do not demand a specialized intellectual effort or theological education for their understanding, since their content is quite simple. However, their theological value is incomparably lower than that of canonical liturgical texts since they contain, as do many Protestant and Catholic hymns, much "piety" but little theology.

What exactly is a moleben? The Orthodox Typicon knows of no such service. In essence, the moleben is the matins service abbreviated beyond recognition and almost totally devoid of theology. The theologically richest sections of matins are the stichera and canons which, as a rule, are totally discarded during the moleben except for refrains, such as "Most Holy Mother of God, save us", "Our Holy Father Nicholas, pray to God for us", and the like. In my opinion, the nearly ubiquitous practice of serving molebens in Russia does not at all attest to the development of liturgical piety in the correct, "Orthodox" direction, but rather the opposite. We can say that processes are taking place in the Russian Church similar to those that occurred in Protestantism and Catholicism at various periods, during which ancient, theologically rich, liturgical texts were replaced by more easy-to-understand chorales, hymns and chants. The final stage of this process of liturgical impoverishment and simplification in the Catholic Church was marked by the reforms of Vatican II. In Protestantism, similar reforms were carried out at the very moment of its appearance in history. In both cases, treasures of theological content were sacrificed for the sake of ease of comprehension. As a result, their services ceased to be a school of theology and meditation on God and remained at most a school of piety.

The widespread practice of serving akathists also does not argue for great optimism. The Orthodox Typicon knows of only one akathist – that served on Saturday of the fifth week of Great Lent. Other remarkable examples of this genre, such as those to the Most-Sweet Jesus and St Nicholas, were written in a similar manner. However, many akathists to saints written at a low theological and literary level appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries, in which theology was replaced by piety and meditation on God by “talking about God”. These are of questionable taste.

Currently many speak of the need to reform Orthodox services in order to make them more understandable and palatable. But if this is to be accomplished by the further removal of canonical liturgical texts and their replacement with works of popular art, I fear that such “reforms” will only bring forth bitter fruits.

I am deeply convinced that there is less a need to “revise” services as one to conform liturgical practice to the Typicon. In this way the faithful will have the possibility of rediscovering the treasures of Orthodox theology contained in canonical liturgical texts. In order to make them more understandable, Slavonic translations could be simplified. Of this much was spoken and written already in the 19th century. Several very difficult texts could be read or sung in Russian, although, in my opinion, a total russification of the services is inadmissible. In addition, one could print these liturgical texts in Slavonic with a parallel Russian translation and hand them out to the congregation before the beginning of services. Thus, not reforms of Orthodox services, but measures to help make their riches more accessible, are necessary.

The Divine Liturgy

Some of my non-Orthodox friends complain that the Orthodox Liturgy is too long, saying “why do you have to stretch out the Eucharist when you can serve it in half an hour?” My experience of the Liturgy is altogether different: two hours are never enough for me, since the time goes by so quickly and the dismissal comes too soon. It is always difficult to leave the altar and to descend from the heavens to earth, from the experience of the sublime to the cares of this world. There is a story about a priest in Saint-Petersburg at the end of the 19th century who had a small room above the church’s sanctuary. After serving Liturgy he would climb into this room by means of a ladder which he would then take with him. Only after two or three hours would he return to the church to talk with people. Although the majority of clergy in the 21st century cannot allow themselves this luxury, the reasons for this priest’s desire to prolong the sweetness of communion with God and the unearthly stillness and calm that enter the soul while serving the Liturgy, are wholly understandable.

The Liturgy is a “common act”, and without doubt demands the presence and active participation of the laity. Orthodox practice knows of no private Liturgies which priests might serve by themselves, as is very widespread in the Catholic Church. The entire structure of the Liturgy also presupposes the presence of a congregation which, together with the priest, is also a celebrant of the Liturgy. This is a congregation not of spectators, but of participants, who join in communion of the Mysteries of Christ. Many have rightly remarked (including Fr Alexander Schmemmann, with special emphasis) that the order of the Liturgy

of the Faithful does not at all presuppose the presence of believers who do not take communion. Contemporary practice, where only those who have prepared themselves commune while the remainder content to stand passively in church, does not correspond to the experience of the ancient Church.

I wholly agree with those who support the revival of ancient church practice whereby lay people commune at every Liturgy. Moreover, the guidelines for preparing for Holy Communion should be the same for both clergy and laity. It seems unfair and contradictory to the meaning of the Liturgy that different rules are laid down for clergy and laity. At the Liturgy everyone – bishops, priests and laity – stands before God with the same dignity, or rather with the same unworthiness, for “nobody attached to fleshly desires and delights is worthy to come near or approach” the communion of Christ’s Holy Mysteries. St John Cassian writes the following about this aspect of communion:

We should not abstain from the Lord’s communion just because we consider ourselves sinful, but rather hasten to it even more for the healing of soul and purification of spirit, with such humility and faith so that, considering ourselves unworthy of receiving such grace, we might desire more the healing of our wounds. Otherwise it would be impossible to receive communion even once a year, as some do...who so esteem the dignity, sanctification and salvific effects of the Heavenly Mysteries that they believe that only the holy and blameless should receive them. It would be better to think that it is these Sacraments that make us pure and holy by their imparting of Grace. Truly these people show more pride than their imagined humility, since they consider themselves worthy of them when they commune. It would be much more correct if we communed every Sunday for the healing of our infirmities, with the same humility of heart through which we believe and confess that we never can worthily approach the Mysteries, rather than...believe that we become worthy of them after the passing of a year.

The active participation of lay people in the Liturgy presupposes the possibility of their responding to the exclamations of the priest and hearing the so-called “silent” prayers. In contemporary church practice these prayers, as a rule, are read by the priest silently, which creates an additional barrier between the priest and his flock. More importantly, this habit deprives the faithful since the main point of the Liturgy passes them by. I have heard many arguments in favour of the practice of silent prayers, but none has seemed convincing to me. The so-called “silent” prayers were originally read aloud by the celebrating clergy. I think that in our time the faithful should have the opportunity to hear these prayers in their entirety, not only their concluding subordinate clauses (these signify that the prayers have been read but do not give the least notion of their content: “That being always guarded by Thy might”, “Singing the triumphant hymn, crying...”, “Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee...”). At least the prayer of the anaphora, which summarizes the essence of the Liturgy, should be read aloud.

The celebration of the Liturgy is a creative act in which the fullness of the Church is involved. The text of the Liturgy is always the same, but each Liturgy grants us the opportunity to experience the mystery in a new light, renewing our encounter with the living God.

Much in the celebration of the Liturgy depends on the clergy. Very frequently the worship is “stolen” from the faithful by

hurried or careless serving. The celebration of the Liturgy, whether it be by a bishop in his cathedral or a village priest, must be unhurried and dignified, and all words should be read as carefully and distinctly as possible. It is very important that the priest pray together with the congregation; he should not mechanically utter words that have long since lost their freshness. It is inadmissible to make the Liturgy a matter of habit or perceive it as something ordinary, even if it is served daily.

Theatricality, acting and artificiality in the serving of the Liturgy are unacceptable. The clergy should not openly express their emotions or draw attention to themselves by their manner of celebration. The congregation's attention must be focused not on them, but on the Celebrator of the Liturgy – Christ Himself. This also holds true for the deacons, who in some cases turn the services into a theatre by exploiting all of their vocal and artistic abilities to make as strong an impression as possible. The role of the deacon is extremely important: he calls the faithful to prayer and is therefore obliged to create a prayerful atmosphere, not ruin it.

Having made mention of the diaconate, it is valuable to note a special characteristic of the Orthodox Liturgy. At its celebration, a warm, trusting relationship is established between the president of the Eucharistic celebration, whether he be a bishop or priest, and the deacon. The deacon repeatedly addresses the celebrant with the words “Pray for me, holy master”, “Remember me, holy master”, to which the latter answers: “May the Lord guide thy steps”, “May the Lord remember thee in His Kingdom”. Whether taking a blessing from the celebrant or handing him the liturgical vessels, the deacon always kisses his hand; before and after every liturgical action the deacon bows to him. These motions are not just vestiges of ancient Church “etiquette”. They also have an iconic dimension, symbolizing the relationship of absolute trust and love that exists between people in the Heavenly Kingdom and which should exist between those who live in God. Moreover, these actions stress the hierarchical nature of the Church, in which, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, divine “emanations” (*proodoi*) and “flows of light” pass from the higher orders to the lower: from angels to humans, from priests to deacons, from the clergy to the laity. Finally, the respect shown during services to the officiating clergyman as the celebrant of the Eucharist who, as it were, represents Christ Himself, is similar to that given to sacred images, for the honour rendered to the icon or type (celebrant) ascends to the Prototype – Christ.

The order of the Liturgy does not ascribe particular functions to the concelebrating priests since the main actions are carried out by the celebrant, deacon and congregation (usually “represented” by the choir). This is why priests normally prefer to serve the Divine Liturgy themselves rather than to concelebrate with other priests. During the service, a special relationship of trust and intimacy is established between the celebrant and God. It is very difficult to describe the essence of this relationship owing to its sacramental, mystical character, but I am sure that many clergymen will agree with the following description by Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern):

The essence of the priesthood consists precisely in the serving of the Liturgy by the priest himself, in the independent celebration of the Divine Eucharist, and not in concelebrating with others. A priest must have an insatiable desire to celebrate the Eucharist, which, certainly, in no way lessens his desire to receive communion from the hands of another (why from an

older and higher ranking?) brother. The mystical desire, incomprehensible to laymen, to offer the Sacrifice and change the Eucharistic gifts into Christ's Body and Blood by the power of the Holy Spirit, is totally different from the feelings and experience of communion at a Liturgy celebrated by another. It is possible to measure the level of "eucharisticity" of a priest precisely by his desire to serve himself.

Archimandrite Cyprian considered the Divine Liturgy to be the "most powerful means of carrying out pastoral service". He stressed that "neither molebens, nor panikhidas, nor akathists... can replace the most holy Eucharistic service". If molebens and panikhidas are indeed necessary, they should be served before, and not after the Liturgy. It seems to me, however, that the Liturgy itself, being a universal and all-encompassing service, contains everything for which molebens and panikhidas are served, including the commemoration of the living and the departed.

If we can call the services of the Orthodox Church a school of theology, then the Divine Liturgy is this school *par excellence*. It teaches us about the mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom because it itself is an icon of this Kingdom, the most complete, perfect reflection of the heavenly reality in our earthly conditions, a revelation of the transcendent through the immanent. In the Kingdom of God all symbols shall pass away, and only the heavenly reality will remain. There we will not commune of the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine, but in a more perfect way we shall be united with Christ Himself, the Source of life and immortality. If the manner of our communion with God will change, its essence will remain the same – always a personal encounter with God, not of isolated people, but of people in communion with each other. In this sense it is correctly said that the Liturgy served on earth is but a part of the incessant Liturgy celebrated by people and angels in the Heavenly Kingdom.

Church Singing

Permit me to say a few words about church singing. Recently I visited the Valaam Monastery of the Transfiguration, where I served an all-night vigil and Divine Liturgy in the monastery's main church. The services there struck me by their prayerfulness, harmony, simplicity and grandeur. The monastic singing and Valaam chant used during the services made an especially strong impression. I suddenly recalled the words of St Ignatius (Brianchaninov), who visited Valaam one and a half centuries ago and was also taken by the monastery's chant:

The tones of this chant are majestic and protracted...they depict the groans of the repentant soul, sighing and longing in the land of its exile for the blessed, desired country of eternal rejoicing and pure, holy delights...These tones now drag on lugubriously, melancholically, drearily, like a wind through the wilderness, now gradually disappear like an echo among cliffs and gorges, now thunder suddenly...The majestic "Lord, have mercy" is like a wind through a desolate place, so sorrowful, moving and drawn out. The troparion "We hymn thee" ends with a protracted, shimmering, overflowing sound, gradually abating and imperceptibly fading under the vaults of the church, just as an echo dies out under a church's arches. And when the brethren sing at vespers "Lord, I have cried unto Thee, hearken unto me", the sounds emanate as if from a deep abyss,

are quickly and thunderously wrested therefrom and rise to heaven like lightning, taking with them the thoughts and wishes of those at prayer. Everything here is full of significance and majesty, and anything merry, light-hearted or playful would simply seem strange and ugly.

Valaam chant is a form of ancient Russian Znamenny chant, which itself absorbed the main characteristics of Byzantine church music. It is known that Byzantine chant was brought to Kievan Rus' already during the time of Yaroslav the Wise. The "Book of Degrees" (Stepennaya Kniga, 1563) mentions that it was during this time that three Greek chanters came to Rus' from Constantinople, bringing with them "special eight-tone, sweet, three-component, and most beautiful extended singing to praise and glorify God". The word "three-component" has been subject to various interpretations by musicologists and theologians. In any case, it refers not to three-voiced, but unison singing. One could suppose that the word "three-component" points to the three dimensions of ancient church chant: the musical, verbal and spiritual, through which it differed from secular singing, which had only two: verbal and musical.

Being comprised of these three aspects, both Russian Znamenny chant and Byzantine singing are phenomena of the same order. They are characterized by a spirituality that is lacking not only in many works of secular music, but also in the contemporary western-style church singing, which is composed according to principles totally different from those of ancient chant. It is no secret that the concert-like, "Italianate" singing performed in many churches does not correspond to the spirit of the traditional liturgical texts to which they were written. The main aim of such music is to give pleasure to the ear, while the aim of true church singing is to help the faithful immerse themselves in the prayerful experience of the mysteries of the faith.

The structure and musical characteristics of ancient Russian singing are also diametrically opposed to those of Western-style singing. Znamenny chant was not written by composers but rather compiled from an already existing collection of canonical musical fragments, just like ancient mosaics were pieced together from a collection of stones of various colours. It is not easy for modern man to appreciate ancient chant, and just as difficult to "lay aside all earthly cares" and enter the depths of prayerful contemplation. But only this and similar singing is truly canonical and corresponds best to the spirit of Orthodox divine services.

Bishop Porfiry (Uspensky), the well-known 19th-century church archaeologist, wrote the following regarding the mystical "three-component" singing of the ancient Russian Church: "We have forgotten this mystery of music, but it was known to our ancestors. The history of our Church shows that at one time Greek chanters from Constantinople brought to Russia angelic three-component singing, that is, singing comprised of three intonations corresponding to the three faculties of the soul. It seems that it would not be too difficult to revive this singing". It is indeed possible to revive it by returning to the ancient, time-tested models of Znamenny chant, as has already taken place in Valaam and several other monasteries.

At present, the monuments of ancient Russian chant are becoming better and better known. Just as ancient Russian icons, once-forgotten but relatively recently (at the beginning of the 20th century) restored to their original splendour once cleaned

of centuries of accumulated soil, Znamenny chant is now being revived by masters skillful at reading its “hook notation”. In my opinion, the restoration of Orthodox liturgical culture to its original beauty, grandeur and instructiveness is unthinkable without the revival of canonical Church singing, which for the Russian Church is Znamenny chant. Concerts of Church music by Bortnyansky and Vedel, and Cherubic hymns by Kastalsky and Archangelsky may be beautiful and moving in certain respects, but their music does not teach us anything, since it only creates a kind of background that is more or less neutral with respect to the words of the service. On the other hand, Znamenny chant possesses enormous edifying power since it was created for prayer, fosters prayer and is irrelevant outside of the context of prayer.

Even the so-called “popevki” (canonical musical fragments), the main building components of Znamenny chant, are nothing other than a musical reflection of various prayerful movements of the soul. Moreover, each musical fragment has its own theological basis. If ancient Russian icons are said to be “theology in colours”, then ancient Russian chant can be considered theology in music. And if western-style church singing, like the Russian “academic” paintings on religious themes are at best a school of piety, then monophonic Znamenny chant can be regarded as a school of prayer and theology.

Liturgical “Ceremony”

At this point I would like to review several aspects of the liturgical ceremony of the Orthodox Church, especially the peculiarities of hierarchical service. People sometimes say that Byzantine liturgical ceremony is outdated and needs to be simplified. The splendour of the Orthodox rite is contrasted with the “simplicity” and “accessibility” of Protestant services. Some consider the bishop’s rites to be too “pompous”, and some bishops only serve the so-called “priest’s service”, believing thereby that they thus demonstrate their humility *urbi et orbi*. One bishop told me that the presence of subdeacons at services distracted him from prayer and that the hierarchical ordo created a “barrier” between the praying faithful and the living God. He also mentioned that subdeacons, bishops’ staves and other items of the hierarchical service are but “tinsel” that must be discarded.

I do not agree with these statements. If services distract one from prayer, then why go to church in the first place? It would be better to stay home, close the door and pray to God in absolute solitude. If you are a bishop but serve the priest’s services, why did you need to be ordained to the episcopate? It would have been better for you to have remained a priest and to serve according to the order for presbyters. Of course, there are times when a bishop has to fulfill priestly functions and serve accordingly (for example, if he is the only clergyman in a particular church). Nevertheless, it seems to me artificial and unjustified when a bishop plays the role of a priest. A bishop’s humility should not be demonstrated in the services conducted according to his own capricious discretion and taste, but rather in faithful adherence to church tradition.

In the Russian emigre communities of the West there is a particular phenomenon unknown to those living in traditionally Orthodox countries: the affectation of poverty. Its roots go back to the times of the first, so-called “Paris”, emigration that lived in *real* poverty, when Orthodox parishes were housed in basements and bishops earned their living by sweeping streets. But

times have changed and modern western bishops have long since ceased to be poor. Some of them, however, continue to affect poverty. When this affectation occurs in everyday matters it is possible to tolerate it, but when it is brought into liturgical practice it becomes unacceptable. A bishop's lifestyle may be extremely simple: indeed, he may not only affect poverty, but *really* live in poverty and humility. But when officiating at services he should appear in all the splendour of his hierarchical dignity.

All forms of artificiality are foreign to Orthodox services, where there is not and should not be anything theatrical or showy. The hierarchical services, worked out in great detail, are not intended to entertain or distract the faithful from prayer but, on the contrary, draw them into the theurgic mystery of the heavenly Eucharist. All aspects of the divine services are symbolic and iconic: not only the iconostasis and church singing, but also the very orders of the services and their so-called ceremony. When subdeacons, deacons, and priests leave the sanctuary one after another holding candles, the bishop's staff, dikiri, trikiri and ripidai, the bishop reads the prayer "O Master, Lord our God, who hast established in the heavens the ranks and hosts of angels and archangels to serve Thy glory, do Thou make our entry an entry with the holy angels who serve and glorify with us Thy goodness". This entire solemn procession is an icon, a symbolic depiction of the majestic, intense, and reverent procession of angels accompanying the King of glory in Heaven. The same can be said of the Great Entrance, during which "The King of kings and the Lord of lords comes to be slain and give Himself as food for the faithful, preceded by the angelic hosts with all authority and power, the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim". It is these "angelic hosts" that are symbolized by the subdeacons, deacons and priests entering the altar to offer the bloodless sacrifice.

If all of this is simply "tinsel" that should be discarded, then why not remove icons, other sacred images and liturgical vessels as well, leaving only bare walls and a minimum of objects necessary for prayer? This is exactly what certain Protestant congregations have done, and now they are getting by quite well without icons and "ceremonies". Everything is simple in their churches, just as in the early Church. But in simplifying the ceremonies and removing sacred images and symbolism from the Liturgy, have they really come closer to the Tradition of the Undivided Church, or have they gone further away from it?

I would like to add that the hierarchical service itself is an irreplaceable liturgical school for those involved in it, notably the subdeacons. Before each service they must carefully iron the bishop's vestments and prepare all necessary liturgical items. Each of these actions is part of one larger sacred act, a kind of proskomedia for the subdeacons, whose behaviour during the service will, to a great extent, determine its overall atmosphere and the impression that it leaves on the congregation. Subdeacons are by no means the bishop's servants, but servants of the Almighty, a fact that they themselves, the bishop, clergy and lay people must remember. There is no place for a servile attitude toward bishops as "bosses". Instead, subdeacons should be taught above all a reverent attitude toward God, the Church and the sanctuary. The bishop should not be a demanding and captious commander to his subdeacons, but a father and teacher who helps them by his own example, character and concelebration to penetrate the mystical depths of the Liturgy and partake of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

The beauty of Orthodox services. The Sanctuary

One of the most noticeable qualities of the divine services is their beauty and splendour. This beauty is also reflected in the external arrangement of the church. There is a well-known story from the ancient “Chronicle of the Years” (Povest’ vremennykh let) that tells of how ambassadors of Prince Vladimir, sent by him to various countries to select the correct faith for Rus’, returned, struck by the service which they attended in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: “We did not know if we were on heaven or earth, for there is no such splendour and beauty on earth, and we are at a loss how to express what we saw. We only know that God is with these people and that their services were better than those of all other countries”. Who knows what the future of Russia may have resembled if Prince Vladimir’s ambassadors did not visit Hagia Sophia and were not inspired by the grandeur of the church and the beauty of Orthodox services?

There is a deep symbolism and edifying quality in the very structure of the Orthodox churches. They are built either in the form of a cross or a rectangle (basilica), the latter symbolizing the Church as a ship, as Noah’s ark, in which the New Israel travels to the Heavenly Kingdom. Byzantine and Russian churches are decorated with frescoes which depict various events from Sacred History. Series of frescoes or mosaics stretch out along the inside of the church, explaining to the faithful the main themes of salvation history and serving as a “Bible in pictures”. Classical examples of this are the early 13th-century Byzantine mosaics in the Sicilian town of Monreale. Two rows of mosaics are visible in the main part of the town’s church: one depicts Old Testament history from the creation of the world to Israel’s entering the Promised Land, while the other New Testament representations from Christ’s Nativity to His Ascension. On the walls are portrayed the apostles Peter and Paul, as well as various events from the life of the early Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles. The centerpiece of this entire composition is comprised of icons of Christ and the Mother of God in the sanctuary’s apse.

Ancient churches had no iconostasis; only a low barrier that divided the sanctuary from the rest of the church so that the former remained “transparent”. The iconostasis appeared gradually: at first it was one-tiered, then later, multi-tiered, the latter becoming especially widespread in ancient Russia. Today the iconostasis is often seen as a wall between the sanctuary and the rest of the church, between the clergy and the faithful. In fact, however, it is a window into another world, for the hosts of saints gaze down at the faithful from the icons. The aim of the iconostasis is not to create an obstacle, but rather to bring the faithful into the mystical life of the “Triumphant Church”, whose saints and angels serve God in incessant rejoicing.

According to the current practice of the Russian Church, the “royal doors” remain open only during episcopal services or at other special occasions. When services are conducted by a priest, they are opened only from time to time. In Greek church practice the royal doors remain open during the entire Liturgy, and some churches in Greece do not have them at all, but only a curtain that is drawn shut after services. In this case the Greek practice corresponds better to the tradition of the early Church and the original meaning of the Liturgy. Just as with the reading of the “silent” prayers, the hiding of the clergy behind massive royal doors does not at all encourage a better understanding of the Liturgy by the faithful. On the contrary, it creates for them a sense of a lack of participation in what is happening in the sanctuary. The impression is that the Liturgy is viewed

as something that takes place between the priest and God, in which the congregation plays no active role.

The sanctuary is often seen as a kind of closed, “off-limits” space, where clergy and acolytes can relax far from the eyes of the faithful. Such a view, of course, totally contradicts its significance as a place of the special presence of God. It is the abode of the Divine *Shekhina*, the same glory of God that once filled the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple. Everybody in the sanctuary should maintain a reverent silence, broken only by the reading of prayers or remarks necessary for the proper conduct of the services. Conversation about other matters in the sanctuary is inadmissible.

Nobody or nothing superfluous should be present in the sanctuary: no “guests of honour” and no unnecessary objects; only those people directly involved in the service and items necessary for its celebration. This sacred space must not be turned into a warehouse of liturgical vessels, a library, a sacristy or anything else. I have seen flagrant disorder in the sanctuaries of several Orthodox churches in the West, where books, commemoration lists, plates, cups for drinking after communion, half-burnt candles, coals for censers, matchboxes, rags and even rolls of toilet paper were strewn about. Once during the Liturgy I saw in the corner of my eye a fire burning at one end of the sanctuary. It turned out that the priests and acolytes were burning the commemoration lists that had been read. Such things occur when there is complete insensitivity to the sanctity of the church and its services.

A church decorated with icons and frescoes, a clean, orderly sanctuary and reverent behaviour by the clergy are all prerequisites if the Orthodox divine services are to be a school of theology.

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I would like to conclude my lecture with some words from the book, *Reflections on the Church and Orthodox Services*, by St John of Kronstadt (vol. 1, Saint Petersburg, 1905, p. 185):

The Church and its divine services are an embodiment and realization of everything in Christianity. Here, in words and actions, are told the entire economy of our salvation, all of Sacred and Church history, all the goodness, wisdom, faithfulness and immutability of God in His deeds and promises, His truth, holiness and eternal might. Here we encounter a wonderful harmony in everything and an amazing logic both in the whole and in the parts. It is the divine wisdom, accessible to simple, loving hearts.

Translated from Russian by William Bush

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