

Why Go to Church If I Have God in My Heart?

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Each one of us has some acquaintances, or even relatives, who regard our gathering in church with puzzlement. Profound lack of understanding is written on their faces, even at times disturbance. Sometimes this pours out in words such as these: "Well, alright, you've committed yourself to the Faith, be that as it may. But why go to church, and waste all that time and effort in doing so? Look at me, for instance; I also believe. But I believe in the heart [literally. soul]. I have God in my heart, and do not need any outward ritualisation. Just remember how, not long ago, the satirist Michael Zadornov remarked: No intermediaries are necessary for me to have communion with God!"

How can we explain our behaviour to such people? As always, there are two ways: that of the fall and that of defence. It is not hard to counter this type of worldly "philosophy." When all is said and done, a little healthy thought is sufficient to understand that the society in which these clowns (or, in present-day parlance, these satirists) flourish as experts in the sphere of theology and regarding the spiritual life, is completely sick. At the very least, it has fallen sick through a loss of a sense of balance; it cannot even laugh at itself, when it sees that now the joke has usurped a place even in preaching from the episcopal cathedra.... Contemporary society is such that it thinks those things are serious, which our forebears used to have only as Carnival Week amusements.

There is no seriousness in the position and contention of our critics that "God is in our hearts!" Of course, there is such a condition in the most exalted paradigm of the spiritual life. And this the Apostle Paul desired for us, when he said: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19), "to be strengthened with the might of His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Eph. 3:16-17).

If the words, "God is within me," had been spoken by the Venerable Seraphim of Sarov, these words would have had some weight, for they would honestly bear witness to the fruit of his spiritual struggle. If a desert-dweller had said that he had trained himself in continual interior prayer, and for that reason he did not perceive [any loss] by his absenting himself from church, which he only rarely attended, then those words, coming from those lips, might be justified.

But when we hear these words from the man on the street, then it is right for us to inquire: As a result of which particular spiritual struggles have you achieved such progress? God is in your soul, you say? Then, explain, what course of prayer you took? How frequently do you recite the Lord's prayer? What? The "Our Father"? You can't remember it clearly?! Alright, then tell us exactly, how is it that you abide with the continual presence of God in your heart? What fruits of the gift of the Spirit have you become aware of in yourself? Here, I'll prompt you: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5:22-23). Do you have these feelings? No, they are not personal characteristics; they are gifts. A gift is that which we formerly did not possess, but which through spiritual regeneration has come into our life, imparting to it renewal. Do you have any understanding of any such renewal?

Can you distinguish in your spiritual experience what is the "presence of God," and what is simply a manifestation of various human characteristics: an awareness of beauty, harmony, a pang of conscience, and human fellowship? You cannot? This surely means that you haven't noticed the moment that God, the Creator of the universe, came into your life and into your soul? How could it not be noticed? Maybe, this means it didn't happen?

Maybe, again, you have become confused in distinguishing between faith in God and the presence of God Himself? And, wait a moment, — do you have such faith in you? Faith is not simply a passive assent — "Well, okay, I agree that there must be Something Faith is a striving towards that which appears right, to that which the soul has resolved to love. Faith is not just a passive acquiescence to some distant authorities or lines of argument; faith is an active thirst — "I want what is necessary for me, that it should be so."

Faith: this is active. It is a striving towards something already perceived but not yet self-evident. A striving towards something which already touches upon our lives, and throws its sheen across them, but which has not yet entered them fully. Faith: this is a desire for new experience. But it is hard to trust those who repeat, "I have my faith, and it is in the heart," and who say this with lacklustre eyes, or believe that then or at any time they have really experienced a striving towards God.

It is impossible to love, without that love showing, without making any kind of advance towards the person whom one loves. Likewise, it is impossible to believe, and not somehow manifest that belief in our outward activities. The rose that one gives to one's beloved is in itself something she does not need. This flower is not dear to her because of its exceptional beauty, but because it has been given a certain lustre on account of the love of the one who gave it to her. The way in which a bought flower stays in one's room is completely different from the way in which one which has been given us does! If a man professes that he loves someone, but doesn't do anything in the name of this love, if he does seek to meet, if he makes no gifts, if he doesn't devote some time for the beloved's company, if he makes no sacrifices — all this means that he must simply be boasting in front of those of his friends who are close to him: "You see, I lack nothing, I've got a sweetheart too!"

So now, you who affirm that "God is in the heart," what have you done to cleanse your heart for this wondrous Presence? How do you address Him, and what do you call Him? How do you keep Him within? How has this Acquaintance changed you? Do you love that One, Whom you have met? And what do you do for the sake of this love? If these questions throw you into a bewildered silence, how is it so when you consider yourselves so exalted above all that you abide with God? Perpetually standing still, you are not looking where you are going, or even noticing if you are stumbling!

One can pose such questions to those people who excuse their laziness by some imaginary "spirituality." Nonetheless it is also important for us to establish why we go to church. To listen to the sermon? But these days you can get that from a radio presenter. To pray? But you can pray everywhere and at any time. Furthermore, this is the very advice of the Apostle: "Pray without ceasing!" Then, to make an offering? But these days there are numerous collections on the streets. To make a note of the announcements?

But you can get that from an acquaintance. To put up a candle? But you can put up a candle in front of your icons at home. And so, why do we go to church?

Furthermore, some people say that if they want to go and pray, they go off to a wood, or to a stream or the seaside, and there in a "Church Erected by God" it is easier for them to be aware of the Creator and to send up glory to Him. Why, they say, do we leave the boundless temple [of creation] to place ourselves under the narrow vaults of a church that is man-made?

Just as the pagans speak of the sacrifices people ought to offer their god, so the Gospel tells us what sacrifice people must needs offer God: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28); "God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

The biblical offerings of sacrifice were not necessary to God, but for the people. People simply must learn to be thankful. People must be instructed that they must deny themselves albeit a portion of their life, of their possessions and of their time (remember the teaching on the Sabbath), and give it over to the Person of the Lord. This is not because God needs this portion which is dedicated to Him, but because thereby people are instructed in sacrificial love.

Only a tenth or hundredth part of religion subsists in what people contribute. The principal part in religion is what God contributes therein. The most important part is not what people do for God's sake, but what God does for the sake of the people. The most important part is not what people bring as an offering in church, but that which they take away from the church!

That which we offer God, we can offer Him in any place. All that is in the world can thus be laid before Him. But there is that small portion of existence in which God is well pleased to reign, not in Himself but in another. That is my soul. This is that chamber within the limitless edifice of the universe, wherein the Builder thereof will not enter without an invitation. And it depends upon us at whose disposal we lay that freedom of ours, which was given us by God. Will we serve God, or will we serve ourselves, our caprices and our lusts? The only way we can augment the limitless power of the Lord is if we offer Him our own free will. For this reason, "a sacrifice unto God is a broken spirit" (Ps. 50:17). And this sacrifice we can offer everywhere. And in this sense, each one of us is a priest. This is the meaning that underlies the words of the Apostle Peter, that the Christians are a people comprised of priests (I Peter 2:9). No one can, in my place, offer God in sacrifice my will. I alone have power over it, and only I can offer it at the Throne of God. Swear an oath of faithfulness and say, "Lord, Thy will and not mine be done! I thank Thee for all that Thou dost desire to bring into my life. Grant me the ability to serve Thee with my every breath!" And this can be done in any place!

So the possibility of offering sacrifice to God is always with us. And we can always say to our ego, the very words which the philosopher Diogenes once used to reply to the world ruler Alexander of Macedonia, who wanted to fulfil some request of the wise out of his love for him: "Make off, and do not block out the sun for me!"

Thus, that a Christian might offer sacrifice to God, it is not necessary for him to be in church. But religion is not only concerned with what we give. More importantly, it is concerned with what we receive. It is not so important why we seek God. It is more important why He seeks us.

Why we often go to church and turn to God with our petitions is well enough known. We turn to God, seeing Him as some kind of generator of humanitarian aid: "Give us, O Lord, better health, greater success and an increase in our wages!" Too often we seek the Lord, according to the saying of the hierarch Dimitry of Rostov, "not for the sake of Jesus, but for a crust of bread." But why does God seek us? Does He require something from us? Or does He wish to give us something?

Why does His Word invite: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28)? This invitation has no such corollary as "and ye shall give Me so and so..." Rather this invitation ends with another promise; it tells of that which God does for those who respond: "And I will give you rest ... and ye shall find rest for your souls."

Thus, God calls us to Himself, so that he might present us with something. Learning — "Learn of Me" (Matt. 11:29): Spirit — "Receive ye of My Spirit;" Love, peace, joy — "Abide in My love" (John 45: 10); "My peace I give unto you;" "That My joy might remain in you." But Christ grants us something further which the mind cannot comprehend.

"Abide in Me, and I in you.... Receive ye this, this is My Blood, which is shed for you...." Christ entrusts His whole Being to the people; both His Divinity and His manhood.

In contemporary medicine there is a certain procedure: the patient is given a transfusion of his own blood. Blood is taken from his body, it is cleansed of various harmful contaminations, or alternatively enriched with certain components, which the sick man's organism cannot itself produce in the required quantities. And this purified or enriched blood is reintroduced into the patient's system. Something of the kind occurs in our relationship with Christ. God became man. He took on Himself our nature, which had fallen into corruption, and in Himself healed it and saturated it with Divinity, Eternalness, and Immortality; and it is His human Body, which has now already passed through death and resurrection, that He returns to us. His human Blood, vitalized by the Divine currents, He pours into us, that we might bear the seed of Resurrection and be communicants of Eternity.

And so, we come to church, so that we might receive something therein. The church — it's just walls; but walls built around the Mysterion [sacrament] of Communion. The Mysterion consists in this: that to the people a hand is extended with the Gifts. Therefore to visit church is not an onerous obligation, but a wondrous privilege. To us there is granted the right to stand as participants in the Mystical Supper. To us there is given the possibility of becoming "partakers of the divine nature." To us there is granted to possibility of contacting an Energy, such that not one of the power stations of the world could produce.

God sought us. And has found us. We simply need to go to that place, where closer than anywhere else God approaches the people, to that place where in an unprecedented way, through the Gifts themselves, He is distributed to the people. If Christ presents us with the Cup with Communion through the Royal Gates, does it behoove us to turn up our noses and affirm that "I have God in my heart"? Christ has said where He awaits us and what He desires to give us. He, the Eternal One, desires to meet us and be united with us in this life, so that in our future, everlasting life, we might not be irreparably alone.

Would it be good manners for us, if we had received a message to meet someone on Pushkin Square, to take a walk on Leo Tolstoy Street at the time appointed? If the meeting was thus missed, who would be guilty? Well, quite obviously, not me, — Pushkin would be!!

Those, who declare that they do not need mediators in their relationship with God, do not begin to understand that in church there awaits them the Mediator, Who once offered sacrifice for them and freed people from the necessity of destroying those fruits which feed the idols of this world. Surely it is not so unbearably difficult to open your hand, so that the Gifts may be placed therein?

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