

# The Experience of "Churching" in Orthodox Christianity

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*"The indefinability of Orthodox churchism is the best proof of its vitality. What is churchism? It is a new life, a life in the Spirit. What then is the criterion to know that it is the right kind of life? – It is beauty"<sup>1</sup>.*

In order to see how crucial the problem of churching is – in modern Russia as well – I suggest we watch a very short video. Last year, on a very bleak rainy day in May, I stopped at the entrance to the Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra (the largest monastery in Russia) with a camera crew from the "Bogoslov" film studio and asked a few visitors of the monastery three simple questions: "What is baptism? How often do you take communion? Who forgives sins?" No theology, no «*communicatio idiomatum*» or "uncreated energies", just very basic questions. Let me put it straight: hearing the answers to this brief quiz made us sit down and think. I would suggest we watch the video now.

I would like to emphasize that all the people involved in the quiz were paying a deliberate visit to the Lavra to pray, venerate the relics and attend monastic services. At the same time, the questions which had, as it would seem, answers that are simple and obvious for a believer, genuinely frightened and confused people.

Approaching the notion of "churching" has recently become a concern not only for priests and theologians, but also for scholars, and in particular sociologists. Wide-ranging estimates of the number of Orthodox believers in Russia (which heavily depend on how the surveys were conducted) are the reason behind this surge of interest to the problem. The percentage of Orthodox believers among the population has oscillated from 2-6% to 70-80%. This has brought forth the question of what the "real" Orthodox believer is. The answers were out there for everyone to see: only a fully churching believer could be called a "real Orthodox Christian".

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<sup>1</sup> Father P. Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, M., Pravda, 1990, p.7

In 2005 the term “churching” was the main focus of the research by a Saint-Petersburg based sociologist Valentina Chesnokova, who elaborated the so-called “Ch-index”. V. Chesnokova came up with sociologically simple and easy-to-use markers to define the degree of churching: frequency of attending church services, regularity of home prayers, reading Scripture, observing the fasts, as well as certain dogmatic aspects – e.g. belief in God, the Holy Trinity, life after death, etc.<sup>2</sup>. However, this approach was faced with an ambivalent reaction among both secular sociologists and the ecclesiastic community<sup>3</sup>. The introduction of the “Ch-index” did not solve the problem of “identifying” Orthodox believers. Currently the issue is progressively making its way from the sociological into the theological field, where it turns out that there are so many gradations of “churching”, and that the connections between the outward markers and the inner state are so oblique, that no universally accepted approach to defining the term exists. All the critics of Chesnakova’s approach are unanimous in pointing out that “the criteria and indicators of being religious must be re-oriented to the authentic logical patterns of religious cultures. If one shifts to this kind of relative stance and measures up a respondent’s religiosity according to the demands of the religions he or she deems his own, then the methodological obstacle in sociologically grasping the religious will disappear”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See E.I. Bashkirova, Transformation of the values of Russian society. Accessed at [http://www.civisbook.ru/files/File/Bashkirova 2000 6.pdf](http://www.civisbook.ru/files/File/Bashkirova%2000%206.pdf). See also V. Chesnokova, *Following the narrow path. The Process of Churching of the Russian population in late 20<sup>th</sup> century*. M., Academicheskyy proekt, 2005

<sup>3</sup> See. e.g. the summary of the seminar on sociology of religion held 19 September 2012 at the Faculty of Sociology of the Moscow State Lomonosov University: <http://sreda.org/2012/poddaetsya-li-pravoslavnost-analizu-na-sotsiologicheskoy-fakultete-mgu-sostoyalsya-seminar-tesnyiy-put-ne-tuda/11564>.

<sup>4</sup> Lebedev, S.D., Sukhorukov, Narrow Path in the Wrong Direction? *Sociological Studies* 1, 2013, p. 118. The issue of establishing the “churching” has a political side to it too. Alina Bagrina, Director of the sociological centre “Sreda”, notes in one of her comments: “Regarding the use of the “weakest answer” principle, the authors (of the article) have an ally, and it is the CIA. The official site states the following: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html> Religions: Russian Orthodox 15-20%, Muslim 10-15%, other Christian 2% (2006 est.)» It is indicated that the figures refer to the number of practicing Christian believers which is, according to the CIA, practically equal to that of the Muslims. No comments.

Whatever the outcome of the academic clashes may be, however, an emergence of a universally accepted marker of being Orthodox and a “real church-goer” could hardly help us in solving the truly ecclesial issue of helping people fully become members of the Church as the Body of Christ. This is what leads me to focus on the inner, theological understanding of the phenomenon of churching in my paper, as well as on the patterns and risks which have to do with it.

### Historical background of the notion

The term “churching” – ὁ ἐκκλησιασμός – is interesting in many different ways. Historically speaking, the notion of churching originated as a specific rite performed over a mother and her baby forty days after its birth. The rite introduced in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD allowed new babies to enter Church life to a certain extent even before their baptism, while it granted their mothers permission to receive Communion once the period of purification was over<sup>5</sup>.

The question of when the term “churching” first emerged in its modern meaning is a tricky one which still awaits clarification. It should be noted in this connection that neither Catholics nor Protestants have this term. More than that: the notion does not go a long way back even in Greek-speaking Orthodox communities. The term virtually does not surface in the corpus of the patristic writings except for the few contexts where it has a strictly practical meaning. The term ἐκκλησιάζειν is used by the Fathers (e.g. by Cyril and John Chrysostom) in a meaning which was standard for that period – “to gather a meeting”. The word had the same sense in antiquity (in Aristophanes etc.), in the Septuagint the same meaning can be found in Deut 31: 12, 28. Even in Modern Greek the verb ἐκκλησιάζομαι simply means attending the church community regularly rather than the process of profound exposure to ecclesial patterns.

The term “churching” is nearly absent from the writings of the later Russian Church Fathers; thus, it occurs only once in the corpus of Theophan the Recluse (in

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<sup>5</sup> See the “Orthodox Encyclopedia”: <http://www.pravenc.ru/text/155394.html>. Cf. also Archpriest A. Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, ch. 5.

his "Sketches of Christian Doctrine"), while Bishop Saint Ignatius<sup>6</sup> makes no use of the term whatsoever.

The term "churchism", in a way similar to "churching", came to be actively used in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, first of all in the so-called religious-philosophic circles, where the importance of "churching of life" and returning to original Christian principles was being discussed. In his "Philosophy of the Cult" Fr Paul Florensky wrote: "We do not live and breathe the Church; rather, we just come there every so often. This means that during the six weekdays we assimilate certain patterns, a non-ecclesial mode of thinking, and during our short visit to the Church our mode of thinking is only somewhat differently adjusted rather than rearranged, while we should think ecclesiastically both within and without the church"<sup>7</sup>. Bishop Mikhail Griбанovsky addressed the same concern: "Churchism is, according to the literal meaning of the word, what characterizes the Church, what makes it different from the other world lying outside the grace of the Church. What has a seal of the Church is ecclesial. That person should be called ecclesial who lives by the spirit of the Church of Christ, is illuminated through its sacraments, loves its doctrine and follows it in all his or her pursuits"<sup>8</sup>. "Churchism is a life pattern in which the transforming activity of the Holy Spirit is evident which is inherent to the Church". It is through churchism that it penetrates into our earthly tumultuous life, and revives and invigorates it"<sup>9</sup>.

However, the modern meaning of the word "churching" goes back only to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when many people who had been brought up in the totalitarian Soviet ideology and culture began entering the Church.

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<sup>6</sup> Ignatius Bryanchaninov – *translator's note*

<sup>7</sup> Father P. Florensky, *The Philosophy of the Cult*, p.7

<sup>8</sup> Bishop Mikhail Griбанovsky, *What is churchism about?* Speech at the session of the Fraternity of Our Lady, *Church Newsletter*, 51-52, 14 December 1886, pp. 827-830).

<sup>9</sup> Bishop Mikhail Griбанovsky, *What is churchism about?* Speech at the session of the Fraternity of Our Lady, *Church Newsletter*, 51-52, 14 December 1886, pp. 827-830).

In order to better understand where the term came from and how it made its way into modern ecclesial vocabulary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is crucial to understand the context in which the Russian Orthodox Church lived in the Soviet epoch. From the general perspective which the society had, the Church came across as an essentially marginalized and closed structure, which was, when not under persecution, only tolerated for political reasons. The borderline setting of the Church, being apart from the Soviet world and its people, was easy to see both in the habitus of the believers and priests and their demeanor, as well as in many other markers. Church life was totally asocial: the opportunities for the Church to do missionary, catechetical or social activities were either cut short or strictly limited to the church premises. Finding himself within the Church, a person who had come to believe in Christ now realized that the way back into society was actually closed to him or her. He or she had either to conceal their belonging to the Church, to constantly act against their principles or to openly challenge the dominating ideology, which would have very clear consequences.

In the aftermath of the protest movement of the 1960s, many saw in the Church the only institution surviving from before the Revolution, which had for the most part retained its unique lifestyle, its centuries-old spiritual regulations, as well as its relative retention of the "estate character". At the same time, it still legally functioned on the territory of the USSR. The Church came to be perceived by the "60s generation" as the only shelter for those sick and tired of "sovietness", the differences between the lifestyle of the "Homo Sovieticus" and the Orthodox believer being paramount. It was probably at this point that the problem of churching as a gradual penetration and profound change not only of mind, but also of all the aspects of life of a person turning to Christ, began to take shape. It is worth noting in this connection that virtually no earlier than the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was churching seen as a reenactment of the lifestyle and traditions formed in the Russian church community in late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with very few unsubstantial alterations.

A special emphasis on churching was laid by His Holiness Patriarch Kyrill, who said that retaining the unity of the Church and the churching of the young people were among his main objectives. Let me quote here the interview of His

Holiness Patriarch Kyrill to the "Russia" TV channel: "When we speak of the churching of the nation, we do not only mean people knowing on which feasts to attend churches. We mean being able to set alive this huge spiritual and cultural layer which a person has inside, very often in a "sleeping mode""<sup>10</sup>.

### **Definition of churching**

Thus, churching is the process of entering the church; its aim is "clothing oneself in Christ" (Gal 3:27) and obtaining "the mind of Christ". This process is substantially different from entering any other social structure or organization. Without a clear understanding of what makes the Church different from a corporation we cannot come close to knowing the essence of churching.

In the Creed, a Christian professes his belief that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Church is an object of faith in the first place – thus, all its above qualities can be less than self-evident. Otherwise stated, in real life a believer will come to face factionalized, vicious, authoritarian and selfish ecclesial institutions, and, while facing all of these, he or she will have to retain the faith that the Church is in fact not like this. Most concerns are usually raised in connection with the sanctity of the Church and its independence from the moral level of its members. As S.I. Fudel, a remarkable theologian of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, puts it, "The sanctity of the Church relies only on the holy things of the Church and on His sacraments. It is not the people that sanctify the Church; rather, it is the Church that turns the people into partakers of the holy things kept within it. However, there is no holy Church without the saints, because in its human aspect, as the theanthropic organism, it is made up of the saints and it is built "for the perfecting of the saints" (Eph 4:12)<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, as A. Khomyakov aptly

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<sup>10</sup> Online access at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1280323.html>

<sup>11</sup> S.I. Fudel, *The Church of the Faithful...*

remarks, "flawless sanctity belongs only to the unity of all the members of the Church"<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, while in terms of external aspects churching can be defined as a believer's mastering of "the church lifestyle, the church mode of thinking, the church points of view on things" (V. Chesnokova) or "the exposure to and realisation of the plenitude of the tradition of the Orthodox Church" (N. Adamenko), the very essence of churching can be described as the process of a Christian's "in-growth" into the mysterious life of the Church as the sacred Body of Christ.

Churching can by no means be reduced to an "incorporating" into the church structure; this is a deeply personal and mystical process, which can get out of pace with the change of one's status within the church organization. It should be pointed out that the notions of churchism and churching are not identical. Churchism is institutional and can be compared to one's status in a corporation, while churching primarily refers to an inner change, reflecting a profound link with the Church not as an institution but as the Living and Holy Body of Christ. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the onset of the revolutionary period, Father Paul Florensky used to joke that before establishing Orthodox missions for the heterodox they should be opened for the students of theological academies: their "churchism" was perfectly all right, while the "churching" was sometimes totally absent. Thus, churching is in many ways a mysterious process which was not quite accomplished even in a community as churchied as Russia would seem to have been back then.

In his Epistle to the Galatians the Apostle Peter expressed what churching is in a vivid and graphic way: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). A truly churchied person is one with a high amplitude of resonance with Christ in all his life. Saints are "truly churchied", even when their lifestyle might seem scandalous for "deeply churchied" people such as, for instance, St Xenia of Saint Petersburg, who would scandalize any pious eye by the way she looked. At the same time, there is a

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<sup>12</sup> A.S. Khomyakov, *A few words by an Orthodox Christian about the Western denominations. In connection with the brochure by G. Loransi*. Moscow, Medium, 1994, pp. 51, 219, 58, 111.

whole host of saints in the Church who, though being the "ecclesial officials", were role models of truly Christian sanctity.

### **Stages of churching**

Churching is a complex, multifaceted and synthetic process, or, rather, a spiritual journey of a person who has heard Christ's call to follow Him. This journey has both its stages and its peculiar challenges and temptations.

Churching has to do with the development of the religious outlook of a person, beginning with the most basic forms of religiosity and going on to the ultimate and most perfect ones. These three stages are traditionally referred to in the patristic tradition as the states of slave, mercenary and son. This mirrors quite accurately the Old Testament idea of personal ascension to God. However, in my opinion, it is worthwhile singling out the "zero", preliminary stage too; that is, the pagan, magical or, rather, mechanical religious outlook which is the most widespread in today's society and which cannot be ignored.

Thus, if we tried to single out the main stages of churching, we would arrive at the following scheme: needing, interest, immersion, studying and understanding, soaking (saturation) and in-growth. Let us now dwell more closely on each of these stages.

#### **Needing**

Shortly before his death Vasily Vasilyevich Rozanov wrote in his diary: "I am thinking about the Church more and more. More and more often. I've come to need it. Before, I used to feast my eyes on it, admire it, ponder it. I evaluated its use. This is completely different. I need it – this is the beginning of all.

Everything before this has been essentially nothing.

How can one help kissing the Church's hand when she provides ways of praying even to the illiterate. An ancient and backward old lady lights an icon lamp and says "Lord have mercy" (which she heard said in church or has come up with on her own) and makes a bow all the way down to the floor.



She does her prayer and gets consolation. The mind of the old and lonely lady is eased.

Who can invent this? This is something neither Pythagoras can “discover” nor Newton can “calculate”.

The Church, however, has done this. It has understood this, it has managed to do so.

The Church has enabled everyone to do so. Hosanna to the Church, like hosanna to Christ – “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”<sup>13</sup>

Churching is absolutely impossible when the Church is “not needed” or if it is something habitual, an afterthought. In Rozanov’s “It became necessary to me” the Church as the “ultimate value” finds perfect expression, as the object of faith which becomes the central element of life, since the Church is here something like the “representative of Christ” on Earth.

It is noteworthy that, according to the sociological studies performed in 2012 by the sociological centre “Sreda”, the largest percentage among the reasons which prompted people to turn to the Church is their religious family upbringing (that is, they had already been churching to a certain degree) and illnesses of loved ones (12% and 7% of the respondents)<sup>14</sup>. As the director of “Sreda” noted, according to the statistics our prime missionaries are our sorrows.

As a rule, some kind of vacuum in life is necessary to trigger churching; an acute sense of “existential emptiness” must be there to bring about the need for the Church. However, this need for the Church to a certain extent proves to be connected with an essentially pagan understanding of religion as a “spiritual market” that offers a universal and efficient remedy for problems once they occur. This is particularly evident in the case of issues which cannot be solved in a usual human way. Having despaired in getting assistance in the secular field, a human

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<sup>13</sup> V. Rozanov, *The Fallen Leaves. Second, and the Last, Chest*. Moscow, Pravda, 1990, p. 556

<sup>14</sup> <http://sreda.org/opros/51-kakaya-doroga-vedet-k-hramu>

being raises their eyes towards heaven and goes to church. Now he or she "feels the need for it".

However, it is already at this stage that dangers may lurk. Firstly, he or she can face the inefficiency of the mechanics of the "spiritual market" which might seem self-evident for his or her effectively pagan outlook. A candle lit in front of a wonder-working icon, a litany service arranged in church or a pilgrimage to holy places can fail to do what was expected from them. And this is very good, otherwise there is the risk of retaining this half-Christian and half-pagan perspective on church life. The discontent inevitably born within this context either urges one to seek the answer for what the reason for the failure is or can bring about disillusionment and prompt one to quit the process of churching.

Another challenge is that the Church is poorly approachable, both in inner and outward terms. A dramatically inadequate number of priests and churches, as well as the psychological distance between them and the laity, boost the risks of the failure to satisfy the emerging need for the Church.

### **Interest**

If the above dangers are happily avoided, the person seeking the Church does not turn away and begins to discover it as a whole new world living by totally different rules to those of the secular society. A constant comparison of the secular and the ecclesial is underway: and the more drastic the difference is, the clearer the church patterns of life become against the background of mundane values, as the Church looks all the more attractive.

Once the interest in church life has been kindled, the neophyte begins to visit church services, read spiritual books, and meet and mingle with churchgoers. He is not at all in the Church yet and chances are he tends to make it explicit. But the very important process of the "bride-show" is underway – studying the object of one's new interest. A person faces quite a challenge: not just getting to know what Orthodox Christianity is from an external perspective, but also making a practical comparison of it with his or her life.

A profound internal conflict of values can result from this examination: the Christian values can be too "solid food" for a person who is used to following earthly ways and consenting to the passions. However, this conflict can lead to the opposite result too: it may literally push a person to become really penitent and to be eager to drastically change his whole lifestyle. Bishop Saint Theophan speaks of the "contrition of the spirit" and "the rise of the anxieties of the conscience" as an apparent sign of the grace of God calling on a person<sup>15</sup>.

However, seeing the Church exceptionally against the background of secular life can be dangerous in that it can prompt becoming radical or even fanatic about faith. This risk has to do with the direction "away from the world" and on to something significant and holy dominating this period; it can be quite vague and not intelligible at the same time. Bishop Saint Theophan the Recluse remarks: "This world is an accomplished world of passions, as well as passions personified in people, habits, deeds. By getting in touch with it in any way you cannot help stirring your own wound or passion according to their likeness or similar structure"<sup>16</sup>. This all makes the urge to cut oneself loose of everything which is connected with sin in the mind of the penitent person only understandable. But if this urge of soul finds the correspondingly resonant context, one can easily expect the birth of another exponent of the radical movements in the Church.

Crucial at this stage of churching is the personality of the priest, the spiritual father of the person "taking a close look at the Church", with whom they can discuss challenges and questions. One's further progress is in many ways dependent on what kind of basis is laid down at this point, what kind of emotions colour this period of getting to know the Church.

This is what stays behind the risks lurking in wait for the one those taking their first interest in the Church. First of all, this interest can simply perish if left without constant support and inspiration, when facing the formalism of the priests and other

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<sup>15</sup> Theophan the Recluse, Bishop of Vysha, *The Way Towards Salvation*, chapter II:5

<sup>16</sup> Theophan the Recluse, Bishop of Vysha. *The Way Towards Salvation*, Moscow, The Rules of Faith, 2008, 1899, pp.480, 272.

church personalities. From the perspective of most people, these include everyone employed at church premises, candle sellers and guards too. Bossiness, pretentiousness and the tendency to avoid any real dialogue can also discourage this original interest and put people off getting involved with the Church. A closed character of the inner life of a parish and "double standards" for insiders and outsiders all work towards bringing about concerns and doubts within those involved in the process of churching as to how right their choice is.

### **Immersion**

The next stage – immersion – usually has to do with starting to take part in the Church sacraments and amending one's life according to God's commandments. Typically, the main "gate" into the church life is the sacrament of confession. It is here that the covenant between man and God once given during holy baptism is renewed. Ideally, once the confession has been made, a person should have a fairly clear idea of what has to be done in order to maintain this state of reconciliation of the human soul with God. This is the start of reformatting one's life, filling it with new content, which is now in many ways defined by the Church. Naturally, external changes in the lifestyle come first: things which are apparently out of keeping with the ecclesial patterns are taken away, gradually giving way to ecclesial values and lifestyle. Probably, one's life comes to be regulated for the first time ever: a person becomes involved in the liturgical rhythms, begins to frequent church services, observe fasts and celebrate Christian feasts.

It should be borne in mind that these changes happen first of all on the external ritual plane. As a rule, the soul continues to live according to its old habits, which often leads to family tensions. Not aware of the profound shift in the value system of the new convert, those around him see him as "going mad about religion" and genuinely hope that this all will be over soon. The new convert's mind is not steady enough yet, he feels essentially insecure and clings to the external expressions of piety, for it is only thanks to these pious "crutches" that he can maintain some kind of "upright posture". A joke has been popular recently: "When there is a neophyte in a household, all its members become martyrs", and this is a very apt characterization of the period of "immersion". It can also be said that this period in the emerging

Christian lifetime is his or her "honeymoon": the mysterious marriage with the Church has been contracted, the past has been left behind, his or her heart is solemnly handed over to Christ, and standing on the threshold of this new life fills you with joy, inspiration and pure elation. Waves of sincere enthusiasm and fascination with the church grandeur, the depth of thought and the prayerful power of the services stream through the neophyte, and he or she realizes that at the long last the ultimate goal and essence of living has been found. Besides, the widest vista of historical, theological, cultural and other kinds of horizons which churchism opens up just takes your breath away. According to Bishop Saint Theophan the Recluse, this is the period of rejoicing in the ample gifts of the grace of God granted free, without particular efforts on the part of the new convert.

However, challenges and temptations lurk here too. Let us point out one of the central of these – the tendency to abandon altogether rational analysis of spiritual life and church life at large which results in disillusionment following a surfeit of the emotional exaltations of the soul. However, the biggest harm can be done by facing the inner deceitfulness of the people "with a long record of church life", the feeling of cold shoulder and indifference of the church community, as well as its personal tensions there. By causing confusion in the still immature, though captivated with fascination, soul of the neophyte, these temptations can lead to a profound disillusionment with the Church as a theanthropic organism, particularly in the cases when the sanctity of the Church is far from self-evident.

### **Studying and understanding**

The "romantic period" of the neophyte's immersion is gradually followed by learning about the basics of the Christian life. A key role in this process is played by regular participation in the church services and sacraments, as well as being in constant touch with the spiritual father. A new hierarchy of values is gradually settling in the mind, new notions like passions and virtues being introduced, this time in practical terms. A Christian outlook is being constructed in one's mind and an understanding of the spiritual "itinerary" is being drawn. The once unambiguous texts of the Scripture become polyphonic and acquire new shades of meaning, which open up not so much through reading research on biblical studies as through the

personal experience of living according to the Gospel. The Scripture is no longer "universal", rather, it begins to be perceived as very personally addressed, chiming in with one's specific needs, concerns and reasons for joy. The initial experience of church life is gained and one becomes accustomed to many things.

There are challenges here, too. First of all, there is the challenge of intellectualism, of reducing Christianity to a type of outlook or ideology. But there is also the opposite extreme of giving up the search for understanding the Christian faith in favour of keeping the established pious lifestyle which has become, in a sense, comfortable. Finding himself or herself strongly dependent on an authoritarian spiritual father, a neophyte can easily slip into becoming uncritical of the practices and perspective of the spiritual life of his teacher; this can prevent him from making further spiritual progress. Combined with the "absolute submission", this more often than not results in a "spiritual short-circuit failure", in which, although the Church is the centre of one's life, its essence is not Christ, but a "God-bearing spiritual leader".

### **Saturation**

At a certain point a Christian's life becomes quite self-contained and well-balanced. There are already almost no unfamiliar things except for a few highbrow and essentially insignificant theological subtleties. It is generally clear what the passions are which tamper with the soul and how to fight them. Taking part in the divine services comes to be a natural part of life. Relations with the spiritual father grow into friendship and the questions asked of him gradually become minor as life starts to be generally pious.

This kind of person can be said to be quite "saturated" – steeped with churchism. Here we come to a very important stage in churching where one passes from external points of support to the inner and significant ones.

However stunning this might seem, becoming used to the sacred is one of the important indicators of this stage of "saturation", which is the main challenge to the spiritual life, according to the holy bishop Theophan the Recluse. After reaching a sufficiently stable state both in the external relationships with the Church and in the

inner spiritual life, one begins to grow cold. This development can be beneficial in a certain way, for it contributes to the minimization of the excesses of the period of the neophyte's elation. However, the danger of losing interest in church life and growing weary of it can lurk here too. A feeling of being devotionally lukewarm becomes a major concern, and this personal state comes to be perceived as a sign of spiritual degradation or even seceding from the plenitude of faith.

The challenge one faces here is that of "spiritual consumerism". A believer starts to have the idea of being on the "final cut" of the road to Kingdom of God where the Church functions only as a kind of "runway" during his personal flight to Heaven; that's why he must always have enough "fuel" for the full flight and the grace of God must always be felt actively and evidently present in the soul.

Many Church Fathers mention this period of a certain lukewarmness in the way the soul feels the presence of the grace of God. Archimandrite Sophronius Sakharov treats this feeling of being abandoned by God which lies in wait for the ascetic at the ultimate stages of ascension to God<sup>17</sup>. Almost every going through stages of churching to some degree is exposed to this. The reason for this is the significance of "personal kenosis" which is a *sine qua non* for the in-depth "ingrowth" into the Church as the Body of Christ. A person wholly concerned only with his own individual salvation cannot break free from the circle of his egotism (although it is spiritual this time round) and become a cell of the organism of the church by abandoning his or her selfish needs.

Unfortunately, a different pattern of tackling the issue of feeling lukewarm can begin to see one's spiritual experience in absolute terms and imposing it on others as the only viable paradigm of Christian life. Naturally enough, clerics are vulnerable to this more often than others. A feeling of his or her superiority and righteousness is fostered in those around, a "sect of the proper" is formed led by a "spirit-bearing guru-monk" who acts as a resonator of the fading out spiritual impulses of the parish members. This results in creating a certain effect of spiritual self-exaltation perceived by the churchgoers as an apparent operation of the grace of God.

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<sup>17</sup> Archimandrite Sophronius (Sakharov), *Spiritual Discourses*, Moscow, Palomnik, 2003, vol.2, p.26

If a proper pattern of churching is followed, the gradual shift of emphasis is there: from the external on to the internal, from the ritualistic on to the sacramental, from the form on to the content. Now with no fear and with an understanding of the role and function of the different aspects of church life the Christian begins to fine-tune and correct the mode of his or her presence in the Church, aiming to fully disclose the operation of the grace of God in his soul. He seeks those forms of spiritual life which prove fitting best to his soul. He faces a major challenge of doing everything he gets to do to the glory of God and before the face of Christ and in doing so not pursuing a big personal ambition but in submission to our Mother Church in order to create the united Body of Christ. As John Chrysostom poetically puts it: "Are you having a meal? Give thanks to God with determination to do so further. Are you sleeping? Give thanks to God with determination to do so further. Are you going to the city agora? Do the same. Let there be nothing secular, nothing mundane, do everything in the name of God"<sup>18</sup>.

### Ingrowth

The feature of last stage of churching – ingrowth – is that the believer cannot live without the Church anymore. As God's commandments are progressively observed and the believer advances in humility, it is necessary to have regular Eucharistic communication with Christ for constant compensation of his weakness, as he or she is nurtured with the grace of God "which replenishes the languishing and treating the ailing"; and a Christian begins, on the one hand, to see his spiritual feebleness and infirmity, but on the other hand, the operation of the grace of God in him becomes evident. "Sanctity – as S. I. Fudel writes – is a certain degree of churching of a person, a degree of transformation of his or her corruptible nature into the Church of God. This is achieved in the great and long challenge of the lifetime, during which a struggle for incorruptibility is going on inside the human being. But if there is struggle, it means there *already* is the Church inside as there *still*

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<sup>18</sup> Cited from S. Zarin, *Asceticism*, Moscow, 1996, p.521



is darkness"<sup>19</sup>. Without seeing this inner "darkness" in realistic terms, without a constant cutting off of this personal darkness from the holy Body of Christ one cannot fully enter the living theanthropic organism. Otherwise the "darkness" would become part of the Body of the Church, and, like a carcinoma, would constantly harm and devour its whole body.

Finding himself at the summit of churching, a Christian drastically changes his vision of the very adverse points he was fighting with at the "entry point" of his Church life. The emphases in one's prayer are shifting from "problem solving" to thanksgiving and praying for the others, the benefits of the Church as a single organism take over personal interests. Saint Isaac the Syrian aptly speaks about this attitude of human towards God: "Do not ask of God those things which he grants us without asking and on His own Providence and which are granted not only to His own and beloved, but also to those bare of the knowledge of Him. A son does not ask his father for bread, but reaches for the utmost in the house of his father. For it is only due to the feebleness of human mind that our Lord commanded to ask for the daily bread. But behold what is commanded to those who are perfect in knowledge and sane in their soul. It has been said to them: Care not about bread and clothes, for if God takes care of the speechless animals, birds and inanimate creatures, all the more does He care about us. Hence seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)<sup>20</sup>. Even the way a Christian feels about demons and other adverse effects changes too: "Neither the demons – Saint Isaac goes on to say – nor the pernicious animals, nor the lascivious people can perform their will to their detriment unless the Counsel of the ruling Lord allows this to happen. Say to yourself: If this be according to God's will that the wicked prevail over His creature, then I accept it without sorrow like someone who

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<sup>19</sup> S. Fudel, *The Church of the Faithful...*

<sup>20</sup> Abbas Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetic Discourses*, Moscow, The rules of Faith, 1993, p.27

does not want God's will to happen. Thus you will rejoice in your temptations like one who knows and feels that beckoning of the Lord"<sup>21</sup>.

The life of the churched person is already unconceivable in isolation from the church and divine service. The Church becomes the very essence of life, or, rather, the very backbone of life "that cannot be moved". In this connection it is relevant to bring up a passage from the memoirs of the late Archpriest Vladimir Pravdolubov (Ryazanskaya region), a well known priest and spiritual father: "We retained our faith because of our churching: there were no schools, no books, there was nothing but the divine service. And a person rejoices in the divine service even if he does not understand a word. The soul which is accustomed to the Church feels that it does not belong in the world, it is homesick there. All these discos, modern gizmos and TV series are repulsive for it. Once a soul beholds the real beauty, the world fades out for it, the world pushes the churched person away from itself. Thus, what matters most for the laymen is frequenting the Church as much as possible"<sup>22</sup>.

### Measuring up the churching

How one can go about measuring up the churching is a very involved question. As mentioned before, Priest Paul Florensky considered the essential indefinability as a crucial aspect of the vitality of churchism (or, rather, churching), beauty being the only criterion<sup>23</sup>.

Recently an article by N.A. Adamenko "The change of attitude to death as a criterion of churching" has been published at the site <http://www.bogoslov.ru><sup>24</sup>. In it its author suggested one's attitude to death as an objective marker of churching. The author argues that during the process of churching the attitude to death changes gradually from pagan concept through the Old Testament notion and on to the truly

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<sup>21</sup> Abbas Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetic Discourses*, Moscow, The rules of Faith, 1993, p.140

<sup>22</sup> Memoirs of archpriest Vladimir Pravdolubov. Recorded by monk Paul (Sherbachev) Accessed at <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/guest/070326115522.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Father P. Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Moscow, Pravda, 1990, p.7

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.bogoslov.ru/text/782964.html>

Christian understanding. N.A. Adamenko shows that while the pagan perspective on death sees it as a natural occurrence common to all the living creatures thus finding a kind of psychological way out in the faith in afterlife or reincarnation, the idea of death held by the churching Christians is absolutely different. For them death is a cosmological tragedy, however, it is overcome by Christ. Therefore, earthly life is a responsible period before entering the Kingdom of God here and now, long before death. The linear Christian perspective on life as the unique chance to either be saved or perish in eternal damnation brings along a totally new pattern of priorities and emphases in life.

### Conclusion

Churching is a new term which originated in the context of the peculiar historical conditions of the existence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet and post-Soviet period although the problem of fully and informally entering church life had also existed in pre-revolutionary Russia. Research into the patterns and ways of churching of modern people should be continued on different levels ranging from studies in an academic theological vein to practical recommendations distributed at parishes. Even if one has learned the Creed and prays every day but does not attend church services and takes no part in the life of the parish, he or she cannot be called Orthodox Christian, however strict the patterns of abstinence and praying he or she might be following. For the Orthodox Christian being churching is an objective state of real participation to and operation of the Holy Spirit within the members of the Body of Christ rather than a state of being "incorporated" into the church structure. There is no salvation beyond this "ingrowth" into the Church.

By way of concluding remarks let me offer the tantalizing evidence of Metropolitan Veniamin (Fedchenkov) about what once struck him as a role model of churching. "Shortly before the death of Father Ioann Kronshtadsky God granted me an opportunity to visit the holy shepherd.

- Holy father – I said – will you please tell me where your ardent faith comes from?
- Where faith comes from? – slowly and thoughtfully repeated the already ailing monk. He remained silent for some time. I have lived in the Church! – suddenly and firmly answered the priest. These

words – alas! – did not make sense to me, “theologian” and student. “Lived in the Church” – what is that supposed to mean? A strange kind of ignorance, as my reader would say. I do not contradict, I avow. But this is exactly what is so sad, that we, the would-be shepherds, did not understand things as simple as “Church” while it was perfectly self-evident for Father Ioann. His answer actually made no sense to me, as if he had spoken in a foreign language. So I repeated my question:

- What does that mean that you have lived in the Church?

This even made Father Ioann a little disappointed.

- Well, what does it mean... I have performed the Divine Liturgy and other services, generally, I have prayed in church.

Then, after thinking a little, he added:

- I enjoyed doing the *menaia* readings. Not the hagiographic *menaia*, but liturgical ones. I loved reading canons to saints. This is what living in the Church means – he finished. The importance of the Church was unfolding for me step by step too. Looking back now I have to admit that it was upheld not by Holy Scripture or patristic works. You can say I never read the latter, and I read almost no lives of saints, neither in the church school nor in the seminary, while the Scripture was just a textbook, and quite cold at that. Neither did it nurture us.
- Probably you could say that it was sermons that made an impact on us? They did not. I remember that up until the theological academy I had not heard a sermon which would have inspired me. Besides, sermons were very scarcely performed in the church school and seminary. While the clergy was being given communion in the altar the chorus used to sing something “concert-like”. But what was it? Maybe they were passages from the Apostle book or the Gospel? No, they weren’t either. We hardly ever understood the Apostle readings and appreciated it only for their loudness and beauty of

performance. We knew the Gospel by heart, and never did Gospel reading take our breath away.

What is left here of the "Church" then? The crucial things: just this standing in the church, taking part in the prayers performed, of course (to different extent for everyone), well, and listening to the word of God. It was this "service", liturgy in particular, simple as it is, without a specific role played by the mind, that kept and fostered our faith. These most basic things: being in the church, presenting yourself at the liturgy, attending divine services – upheld our faith in a miraculous way. Which way? We never gave a single thought to it. But it was this very "going to the church" that fostered us the most".<sup>25</sup>

## **Additional material**

### **Challenges to churching**

One of the most challenging problems of churching is that nowadays almost always there is an advance of social or hierarchical status of a believer by comparison with the level of his or her churching. In many ways it has to do with the dramatic lack of clergy and specialists in social and missionary work.

A separate question is the problem of churching of children.

Saint Bishop Basil the Great: "Separation from the world is not about not being present in the world bodily; rather, it is about putting your soul far away from the fondness of body"<sup>26</sup>.

The following was told about the bishop of Oxyrhynchus called Anthius. When he was a monk, he used to have a very strict lifestyle, however when he became bishop, he wanted to have as strict a lifestyle in the secular world, but he could not. Prostrating himself in front of God, he inquired: Is it because of being a bishop that [the grace of God] has abandoned me? And it was disclosed to him that "No, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Metropolitan Veniamin (Fedchenkov), *On Believing, Non-believing and Doubting*. Saint Petersburg, Neva, Ladoga-Onega, 1992, p.51

<sup>26</sup> Cited from S. Zarin, *Asceticism*, Moscow, 1996, p.518

not; but you were in the desert back then. There was no one around and God helped you. Now you are in the world and people help you".

"There is a fundamental hallmark of the true Church and true churchism; it is a combination of the dogmatic accuracy and moral integrity, of teaching and sanctity, faith and love"<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> S.I. Fudel, *The Church of the Faithful...*