

How Each of Us Can and Ought to Serve The Church

Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky

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If we love the Church, if She is dear to us, then how can each of us serve Her? And if someone were to ask you: "How have you served Her?" what activities can you boast of? When this question was put to the holy Apostle Paul and he had to defend his authority before the Corinthian Christians, he answered in this way: I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities (II Cor. 11:30). Glory in our infirmities? Without question, the humble realization of our infirmities is beneficial for each of us, but how can we serve the Church in this way? At the same time, the holy Apostle insists on his answer and explains: For when I am weak, then am I strong (II Cor. 12:10).

Then, this is no paradox, no play on words, no contradiction. The Apostle shows no trace of being "imaginative" or "witty." He writes from the fullness of his heart, from deep conviction. His meaning is direct. He speaks of the Christian principle of life.

Christianity upset the usual concepts dominant in the world, and in particular the concept of power. According to Christianity, power is what "seems" to the world to be impotence, what appears to its short-sighted view to be a contemptible weakness. Christian power is meekness. Meekness is the law of the new life and action, under whose banner the Gospel declared war on the world: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are they that mourn. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. The poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek - is this not infirmity (weakness) in the usual human understanding? Yes, "in the world," without Christ, without faith, outside the Church and apart from Christianity one cannot pit meekness and spiritual poverty (humility) against the mighty, against all that has power and authority in the world; nor can they oppose the proud power of the will, so often brutal, hardened, and harsh. They cannot stand against sheer physical power, the power of naked force; nor can they withstand the power of a refined and clever mind or the power of the simple majority. How is it possible to take up arms against the entire arsenal of this world armed only with the weapons of "meekness and temperance, purity and chastity, love of brother and the poor, of patience and vigilance," as we hear, for example, in the prayer to St. Job of Pochaev, one of the strugglers for the life, rights, and dignity of the Orthodox Church in Western Russia against Roman Catholicism.

But He of Whom the prophet said A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench (Is. 42:3), Who bore His obedience, being obedient even unto death, even to the death on the Cross: He, our Lord, stated even before His sufferings on the Cross, Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

The meek Christian virtues are a mighty power in God's world - they are an artery by which the power of God comes down into the world. In order to understand this, we must pull back the veil from our own personal world-view. A veil usually hangs before our mental eye that limits our thoughts and our actions in earthly life. But when we pull back the veil, before us open perspectives of eternity, with faith in the immortality of our soul, with faith in God, with faith in the radiant kingdom of eternal life. In the face of eternal life, concepts are completely changed: much that is great becomes of no consequence, and the insignificant becomes great. He who believes and beholds the Kingdom of God with spiritual eyes is like a giant whose head reaches the heavens. Who has strength

enough to throw him down? They can slay his body, they cannot kill his soul and spirit. The words of St. Paul can be applied to such spiritual giants: For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). Here there is an authentic feeling of his power, which the Apostle expresses in the words: We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves (Rom. 15:1).

And so two contradictory laws of life stand against one another, two kingdoms: the kingdom of the meek and the kingdom of the powerful. The kingdom of the meek is forced to wage war against the kingdom of power while located in the midst of it and surrounded on all sides by the kingdom of power and force.

The struggle continues. It is difficult for the Church. It is not surprising that the human powers of the Church weaken towards the end of the struggle. But the end has been written beforehand in heaven: victory is on the side of the kingdom of the meek. And should it not turn out this way by the laws of logic? For the Church has been standing against the kingdom of the world for two millennia now. If meekness were not power, then how could she have survived for even the shortest time in the struggle? Still, there come moments in the history of the Church when Her powers, exposed to popular view, weaken in the struggle. Why? Is this because the meek Christian weapons turn out to be useless or insufficient? No! This happens when, under the influence of discouragement and weakness of faith, those who serve the Church forget their true armament and adopt a foreign kind. The evil world urges its own weapons on them: worldly power, force, deceit. If those who serve the Church yield to the enticement, they weaken and bring Her internal sufferings as well. History gives us sufficient examples of this sort.

The world creeps into the Church by an even simpler method: by human passions, self-love, and ambition, love for the first place, insistence on one's own will. The world of the proud creeps in with the wish to submit the Church to one's own plans, to make her an instrument that is political, national, even partisan. It creeps in through indulging our weaknesses of the flesh, through replacing authentic virtues with seeming ones; in a word, through the help of those powerful, poisonous means which are called the spirit of flattery (or deceit).

By nature the Church is meek and it is easy to insult Her. If we attentively read the history of the Church, we can see how many have insulted Her from within, entering into Her very heart and thus all the more painfully wounding Her. But it is insufficient to say that there have been offenders: it is more grievous that so-called scientific history attributes the actions of those offenders to the Church and blames and blasphemes Her for these actions.

We should all remember this when our thoughts are directed to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Someone may think: this is a peculiar little handful of Orthodox scattered over the far ends of the earth. What kind of social force do we represent? If the numerically, materially, and morally powerful branches of historical Christianity are withstanding the powers of this world with difficulty, then what are we to think of our Church? In answer to such a thought, we must remember that the power of the Church is not in numbers. Rather that in order to preserve inner, spiritual strength one should stand apart, and such is the situation of the Russian Church Abroad. Thus, if we are children of

the Russian Church Abroad, if we are devoted to Her, if we love Her and wish to see Her internally mighty and glorious, then how can each of us serve Her?

Of course, the fullest form of serving the Church is for a person to give himself to Her completely for his entire life as a pastor or in another life of service, close to the pastorate. But we must not feel that only the ordained servants of the Church are called to be Her soldiers while the others are only observers - some sympathetic, others critical. Each of us has a place in the ranks of the soldiers of the Church, and the forms of participation in service to the Church are varied. The Apostle writes: Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called (I Cor. 7:20). Translating this quotation into contemporary concepts, we can say that there does not exist a constructive, honest profession and a social position where a good person could not at one time or another contribute his good mite to the work of the Church. Look at how the fruits of pagan higher education were used to great advantage by the great hierarchs Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom. What a precious heritage they gave to the Church!

The Church is meek. For this reason She is in need of protection and defense. Only they must be good means for her defense. In the past, both the Byzantine and Russian Churches had external defenders: a governmental system, the emperors, the tsars; although one must admit that there were times when this defense was worse than none. Times have changed. Now the care of the Church is entrusted by the Lord to the people of the Church Herself, and so to each Orthodox Christian. In this regard we are returning to the times of the first Christians. Our times call us all to a conscious, constant sacrificial "stand for the Church," each with his talents and means. However, the principal power of service does not lie in our knowledge, abilities, and callings. The principal power is in the "infirmity" through which the power of Christ comes to abide. It is in our morality, in our living according to the law of the Gospel, according to the law of the Church. How we are to bring this about in a practical way is taught by the most perfect example of the holy martyrs and ascetics; it is demonstrated also by the Orthodox monasteries, the builders of Russia, such as the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, the Optina Hermitage, the Lavra of Pochaev and others that existed before the Revolution. But since all this remains in the past, in order to find an example in the present, let us look at least to the handful of modest monastic communities of our Church in the corners of the Russian diaspora - to these small groups of people, both men and women, who have given themselves over to the law of meekness and obedience. Concerning them we can say rightfully with the Apostle: For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are (I Cor. 1:26-28). The quiet, meek, laborious life of the monastery sheds such a beneficial and varied influence far beyond its own physical limits! And what a good result is granted just by contact with this world, as many different persons can testify! Of course the same can also be said about the Orthodox monasteries that are not of Russian background. Those who think that prayer, fasting, temperance, ascetic labor, and the struggle with vices have only the goal of personal salvation and thus those who practice these good works, as it were, conceal in themselves a subtle spirit of egotism, are gravely mistaken.

Rather, internal work on oneself is an investment in the Church. This is a gathering in of the powers of the Church, a collecting of the Church's wealth, which does not consist in the number of persons, not in large and opulent church buildings, not in sonorous choirs, not even in impressive statistics about philanthropy - but rather in the moral life of Her members.

One must serve the Church as the one body of Christ, a single organism, a single substance. Each one's personality is the plot of land entrusted to him for him to labor over, clean up, and produce fruit on. In working on ourselves, we work for the whole, for the entire Church, for Its Head, the selfless Saviour. In letting one's plot grow over, neglecting it, condemning it, we bring harm not only to ourselves but also to the Church. By not gathering for our own soul, we scatter what belongs to the Church.

Our service to the Church consists in this: that through our personal Christian life the spirit of the Gospel values flows into the life of the world, thus putting the enemies of the Church to shame. In our personal qualities lies the pledge of the internal unity of the Church as a whole and of the parish in particular; from this source come mutual understanding, obedience, unanimity in goals, friendly labor for the glory of God and the glory of the Church. Thus a completely unique Church atmosphere is established. In such an atmosphere a person feels that he is in a special world, which gives rest and joy to the soul, refreshing and renewing it. One strives to come to it as if to a new earth, the earth of the meek. In it one feels the beneficial power of the Church within oneself. It is easier in such circumstances for the soul to open up to the reception of the breath of the Grace of God that abides in the Church. But if this spirit is absent; if within the groups of the Church there are divisions, discord, the struggle of ambition and self-love, then can one, in such circumstances, speak of the power of the Church.?

Therefore, to the question of how we can serve the Church, the answer is simple: by active obedience to Her. Active obedience to Her is a life according to the rules of the Church, observance of moral laws, zealous attendance at church services, prayer at home, a Christian foundation and direction in home life. We can say then, in general, that for us it consists of the joy of belonging to the Russian Church Abroad as a true confessor of the Orthodox Catholic faith and a herald of righteousness, and a corresponding attitude in our personal life which worthily reflects that membership.