



## ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY and BIBLICAL CRITICISM

by Father John Breck

Modern biblical scholarship has been taken by many people, including Orthodox Christians pastors, as both a blessing and a bane. On the one hand, it has provided us with extraordinary insight into the culture, language and religious diversity of Jesus' day. It has underscored the significance of His Jewish roots and placed the "Jesus movement" in a social and historical framework that offers readers of the Bible virtual participation in the story of Jesus and the early Church. On the other hand, it has focused so exclusively on the "historical Jesus" that the ultimate meaning of His person, life and work has largely disappeared in a fog of "facts."

If some occurrence of the past -- a person or event, Jesus Christ for example -- could have been tape-recorded, filmed or otherwise media-covered, then we consider it to be factual. It actually happened, and we can take it seriously. If not, then that occurrence is hardly worth talking about. From this point of view, genuine knowledge is provided not by theology or metaphysics, but by the empirical sciences. This is a thumbnail description of what is known in philosophical circles as "positivism." To many readers of the Bible, modern scholarship appears to be captive to a certain positivism in its approach to the Scriptures. By restricting their inquiry to historical questions, including the process by which the gospel narratives took shape, biblical critics generally seem unable to deal with events or realities that transcend history: the question of Christ's preexistence, for example, or the significance of His miracles, or the experience of the Holy Spirit in the Church and Christian life.

This diagnosis of a positivist approach to Scripture may to some degree be correct. More to the point, though, is the fact that the Church has always known another means, in addition to historical inquiry, for acquiring knowledge of God. This way does not deny the importance of historical study of the Bible. Yet it does recognize that any quest for the "historical Jesus" is ultimately bound to fail if it does not lead to a living and life-giving

communion with Him. There is an Orthodox pastoral approach that offers a way of reconciling Biblical criticism and our faith. For example, the words attributed to Jesus in St. John's Gospel "sound" very different from those He speaks in the Synoptics (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke). In order to explain that fact, we must first recall that the main purpose of the evangelists was to write *theology*, not biography or historiography. They were concerned to preach the Good News, not to offer a detailed account of specific events or reproduce verbatim specific sayings of Christ, except insofar as such specificity was needed to convey the message of salvation.



Each evangelist felt free to take the received tradition, which St. Paul terms *paradosis* (I Cor 15.1-5), and reshape it according to his own experience, his own understanding of Jesus' person and work, and the particular needs of his own community. A comparison between St. John's Gospel and the Synoptics demonstrates clearly that many sayings of Jesus came down through oral tradition in several different versions. Similarly, the Gospels reflect different, and irreconcilable, traditions concerning even the most significant events in Jesus' life, such as the cleansing of the Temple (compare Mt. 21.12-17 with Jn. 2.13-22) or the day on which the Last Supper was celebrated (according to the Synoptic Gospels it was the Passover meal; according to St. John's Gospel, it was a pre-Passover meal, served the preceding day).

The real question here is not which words or interpretation is *authentic*; the question concerns the *canonicity* of those teachings, their divine origin and authority. If we take the notion of "inspiration" seriously, it can only mean that the Holy Spirit both guides the composition of the apostolic writings and confers canonical authority on them. The risen and glorified Lord, together with the Father, sends the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete and Spirit of Truth, upon the Church, in order to guide Christ's followers into "all the truth" (Jn. 14.26, 16.13-15). The Spirit receives what is Christ's and conveys it to the Christian community through the witness of the evangelist, beginning with his oral preaching. Inspiration is the key to this point. It is the risen Lord Himself who speaks through the Holy Spirit, just as it is the Spirit who guides composition of the Gospel. The words that St. John attributes to Jesus are the *words of Jesus*. Perhaps they were not spoken during Jesus' earthly ministry in the precise way that they appear in the Gospel. But the words the evangelist attributes to Jesus are in fact the words of the risen Lord communicated to him by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the Church.

If Jesus truly rose from the dead, then any quest for the historical Jesus is useful only insofar as it serves to unite the believer to the resurrected Christ, who is alive and active within the Church and world today. It is the failure of so much modern biblical scholarship to achieve this lofty goal that leads so many faithful to reject it as irrelevant, if not subversive, even demonic. This is an unfair judgment, since the preaching and teaching of Scripture necessarily draw their insights from what biblical scholars, beginning with the ancient patristic authors, tell us about such things as the meaning of Jesus' parables and the significance of His crucifixion. In fact, for Orthodox Christians, authentic biblical interpretation reveals the face not only of Jesus during His earthly ministry, but also of Jesus as the risen and glorified Lord.

(over)

Orthodox Christians are often accused of putting more emphasis on doctrine and liturgy than on the Bible. This is not the case, since Orthodoxy grounds its belief and its worship solidly on biblical witness. It recognizes that the Bible is in the fullest sense "canon": the uniquely authoritative standard for belief and conduct. Yet if creeds, hymns and sacraments play such a major part in Orthodox life, it is because they have a remarkable, even vital capacity to create and nourish a living communion between Christ and members of His Body. When Scripture is interpreted through good preaching, it becomes the source of a deep and intimate knowledge of God. The same is true when it is interpreted through liturgical hymns and confessions of faith, or when it is celebrated in the form of sacraments.

The mystery of Christ -- the truth of the Gospel -- is greater than any human expression. Language remains symbolic. It strives to grasp and express the truth, but it can by no means exhaust truth. The Gospels have their own language, unlike that of any other writing. It is human language, yes, but it is also *inspired* language, shaped by the Spirit of the risen Lord, Who works through the biblical author in such a way as to convey canonical authority to Scripture as *the* perfect expression of revelation. Therefore the words of Jesus that are in the Gospel of St. John, or elsewhere in the New Testament, are indeed "authentic." For whether they stem from the period prior to His Crucifixion, or whether they represent

the "words" (the ongoing revelation) of the risen Lord, conveyed through the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit, they originate with Jesus Christ Himself.

While those who uncompromisingly insist on "sola scriptura" will disagree, this pastoral approach holds true for all Christians who have **"tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come"** (Heb. 6.4-5). They know, on the basis of personal experience, that God has placed within our hearts an insatiable longing for Himself. That longing, far more than intellectual

curiosity or even a serious "religious concern," is what drives our quest for knowledge of Christ and communion with Him. Orthodox worship is perhaps the best expression of that longing. Its place in any true "Jesus Quest" is found in a prayer of thanksgiving which follows the taking of Holy Communion. It is a prayer that speaks of the awe and wonder we can feel in the presence of the living Lord, once the words of Scripture have been sacramentally transformed into a Word of Life.

**"You are the true desire and the ineffable joy of those who love you, O Christ our God, and all creation sings your praise forever!"** □

## The New Testament and Priestly Ministry

from "Church and Ministry" by + Fr John Meyendorff

As a collection of writings composed on different occasions, by different people, and for different immediate purposes, the New Testament does not use consistent terminology on the issue of the ministry. Furthermore, the conditions under which the Christian communities existed in the apostolic age were different from ours. This is why the simple use of proof-texts, as has been so often done since the sixteenth century to make one point or another in the debate between Reformers and counter-Reformers, has generally led to dead ends.

However, while Jesus did not leave the Christian communities with detailed institutional directives, the extraordinary fact remains that by the middle of the second century there existed a uniform pattern of church structure, adopted by all local churches. This basic unity -- which did not exclude some diversity in forms -- can be explained either by an unlikely, extra-Christian influence decisive enough to be universally accepted without controversy, or *by the very nature of the Church itself*. It is my strong belief that the latter is indeed the case and that, therefore, the present day debate about ministry is not a matter of pure historical research, but fundamentally a debate about ecclesiology.

Formal or descriptive evidence concerning the life of the Christian communities in the first century is extremely scarce. It can be affirmed, however, that the fundamental spiritual realities were for these communities an *anamnesis* or "remembrance" of the

death and resurrection of Jesus as saving events, and as *eschatological* anticipation of the coming of His Kingdom. This anamnesis and this anticipation were both realized in the eucharistic meal: **"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"** (1 Cor. 11.26). It was in the eucharistic meal and through it that the Church was truly herself, the Church of God, and it is, therefore, within the framework of the eucharistic assembly, gathered every week on the Lord's Day, that the internal structure of the Church had to take its shape. Indeed, if the Eucharist was a reenactment of the Last Supper, someone had to sit in the place of the Lord and pronounce the words He commanded His disciples to say. The Eucharist was also a participation in the forthcoming Messianic banquet of the Kingdom as it was seen by the author of Revelation: **"a throne stood in heaven, with One seated on the throne. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders [presbyteroi]"** (Rev. 4.2,4).

The Church's "catholicity" is possible only within the apostolic faith (because the apostles witnessed to the Resurrection) and in expectation of the eschatological fulfillment. It is fully manifested only in the Eucharist, which is both a memorial and an anticipation. But this transcendent nature of the Church's being is also liberating: the good news of the Resurrection of Christ liberates humanity from historical, geographic, or rational determinism. It makes us free by faith. □

## PASTORS TO PASTORS

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# "Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

## Fr John Tkachuk

Rector, The Sign of the Theotokos Church, Montreal, Canada  
Dean, Quebec Deanery

**Q. Fr John, how did your theological education at St. Vladimir's Seminary prepare you for the priesthood? In general, how does a good understanding of theology help the Orthodox pastor?**

A. I studied at SVS during the turbulent '60s straight out of high school (1962-69; times of racial struggles, hippies, death-of-God fads, Vietnam protests, etc.). The time of the "pre-the" four undergraduate years at Fordham and later Iona while living at SVS provided me with a good grounding in the liturgical life of the Church, and the three years of graduate academic work at the Seminary served to deepen this stability. This liturgical formation provided a focus to "plug in" all the academic and practical aspects of preparation for a life of service in the priesthood. From Liturgical Music to New Testament Greek to Church Slavonic to Patristics to Church History to Liturgical Theology to Canon Law to Old and New Testament scriptures -- all provided insights into how the Church as the Body of Christ operates.

This breadth of theology helps the Orthodox pastor not surrender to a "reductionist" vision of God and His Church and His people, and His world. The examples we saw in our hierarchs of that period -- pioneering workers for a united Orthodox witness in the Americas such as Archbishop Iakovos (Kukuzis) and Metropolitans +Anthony (Bashir) and +Leonty (Turkevich) -- provided my generation with a still-ongoing longing for a more cooperative and harmonious administration of the Church by her leaders.

In sharing the same tradition of "faith and life" through study and participation in the Liturgy of the Church, Orthodox pastors of all backgrounds give the People of God and all the peoples of the world living examples of servants of God.

**Q. For almost thirty years your priestly work has taken place in**

**Canada. What are some of the particular characteristics of Orthodox pastoral ministry there?**

A. My wife and I were both naturalized as US citizens as children after arriving with our respective families from Europe in the early 1950s, and value the citizenship we "earned" in America. After marriage and ordination, we served parishes in Ansonia CT and Buffalo NY for four years, and came to Canada in 1973. We both became "dual citizens" once the US State Department permitted this (she in 1987, I in 1991). We have no plans of leaving here in the foreseeable future.

If there is any truth in the cliché of the USA as a "melting pot," then there is also some truth of Canada as a "mosaic" instead. Canada is officially bi-lingual (English and French), but all the provinces support other mother-tongues as well; the result is that most people are effectively tri-lingual to some extent. Thus, Orthodox parishes in Canada tend to be more "ethnic" than their southern counterparts, since even many third- and fourth-generation families retain their mother tongues. Now I know that walking in downtown Manhattan one will hear languages other than English, but walking anywhere in Montreal one will hear even more (reminds me of San Francisco when I was growing up there in the late 1950s)! This "cosmopolitan" character is both a welcome challenge and possible pitfall. The urge for insularity from others can sometimes be strong, but the thrill of diversity and mutual understanding is usually more tantalizing and interesting!

So, on a real-world level, the Greek parishes in Canada tend to be more Greek than in the USA, the Russian ones more Russian, etc. But this makes the English (and French) ones "stand out" all the more -- and, while more effort must be put into pulling-together parishes of diverse ethnic backgrounds for common projects, the resulting realization that we

nevertheless are united by our one faith and worship is plain to see for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox as well.

**Q. Your father, Fr. Igor Thachuk, was a great pastor who served the Orthodox Church in America for many years. Can you share some thoughts with us about him and how he influenced your life?**

A. The reason I became a priest is because my father was a priest. (Ballplayers' offsprings often become ballplayers, actors' sons actors, etc.) But he never even once suggested to me either in childhood or in adolescence that I should "follow in his footsteps." He was educated at the Warsaw Theological Faculty before World War II, and remained to the end of his life in 1995 a proud Russian-American.

He brought my sister and me to America from the German DP camps (our mother had remained behind in Switzerland for treatment of her tuberculosis, joining us a couple of years later). While serving in San Francisco first at the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity and later at the Home of Mercy, he worked nights as a janitor at the Standard Oil building. Although I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, I was witnessing faithfulness and fidelity to one's calling in him.

He loved people, and he loved to serve liturgical services. I still correspond with some of the people and their children in parishes he served, and my mother still occasionally says to me "Papa loved to serve, and he served beautifully." He telephoned and sent greeting cards to so many people on so many occasions, and the ties he established with parishioners linger to this day for me (in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Cleveland, New York City and elsewhere).

(Fr Tkachuk, to page 4)

## NEW WEB RESOURCES DEBUT

In January, 2002, two new resource series made their appearance on the Orthodox Church in America web site at [www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org).

### "Life in Christ: A Series of Pastoral Reflections"

is a bimonthly series edited by Very Rev John Breck, formerly professor of New Testament at St Vladimir's Seminary and currently director of St Silouan Retreat in South Carolina.

Offered as a ministry of the OCA Pastoral Life Unit, installments will appear on the web site on the *first and third Fridays* of each month.



The second new resource is entitled "**Daily Worship**" the product of eight months of work by the OCA's web team. It includes the entire calendar of saints found in the *Rubrics* published by St Tikhon's Seminary, South Canaan, PA. It also features over 850 individual icons; databases and tables for a fully automated system that allows web browsers to search by individual saints.

When completed, "Daily Worship" will be the most comprehensive Orthodox resource of its kind on the World Wide Web. □

### (Fr John Tkachuk, continued)

When I approached him during my last year of high school in Cleveland and stated that I thought of going to seminary, he said "It won't be easy -- go to St. Vladimir's since it's difficult, but at least I'll be able to keep an eye on you" (he knew he was going to be transferred to NYC a few years later).

During my time at SVS and first years of priesthood, he sometimes chided me for my "Schmemannisms and Meyendorffisms" (some of my many "other fathers" in the priesthood) if these were in any way different from his "old school" training in Poland, but I knew his love and support and I love and salute him for that!

**Q. You are a former Chairman of the OCA's Pastoral Department and the founder of "Pastors to Pastors." In**

**your opinion, what are the critical issues that face Orthodox pastors in North America?**

**A.** Although I learned the Orthodox theory of the "collegiality of the priesthood" in seminary, I did not really experience it close-up in practice until I became a reserve chaplain in the US Air Force in 1983. The "teamwork" of a chapel-staff in the military is something we lack in the Orthodox world even now: if someone needs to be visited in the hospital, the priest is usually the first who has to go. Most of us, in most parishes, are alone in trying to build a "team" in the parish. Thank God that in so many places so many people are beginning to realize that the Christian Life is a team-effort. For too long, both pastors and their flocks thought that the priest's got to do his thing, and the people their thing. Now, here in North America, we are finally seeing the light

that the life of the Church is a common work.

"Pastors to Pastors" is something that sprang from the US Air Force experience. The military provides (at our taxpayers' expense!) ongoing continuing- education and development-programs for their chaplains, in everything from deployment-training to crisis-intervention to retirement-planning. They act also as pastors to pastors. Do we?

So, the most critical issue that I see us facing as Orthodox pastors is that we have to build-up and encourage each other in our ministry: to know a sense of satisfaction and joy in having joined the long-line of the saintly pastors -- Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom... Innocent and Tikhon (of America and) of Moscow, Raphael of Brooklyn, *et al.* And we should be able to work towards this goal in one united Orthodox Church in North America! □

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