

## Common Prayer

It is early morning and the wooden *talanto*, used by Noah to summon the animals and birds into the ark, is now being struck in the courtyard of the Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos as we, in turn, are summoned to the Divine Liturgy. We enter the *katholikon*, the church of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, pass through the outer chapel or narthex, and take our place in the nave amongst the other pilgrims and the workmen who live at the monastery whilst they help to restore its ancient buildings.

Coming into the dark from the bright sunshine of the courtyard, it takes a while to adjust. But when we do, our eyes are drawn upwards to the great dome of the *katholikon* and the golden corona that hangs from it, lit by candles and accompanied on either side by large chandeliers, each one also golden and candle lit. Before us is the iconostasis, a high wooden screen with many icons but especially the figures of Mary the Mother of God, Christ and St. John the Baptist. And in front, standing upon an easel or resting against a pillar are the Madonna and Child and an icon of The Hospitality of Abraham, in which Abraham and Sarah are accompanied by the three angels that, to the Orthodox, represent the Trinity.

From the apses on either side of the transept comes the chant of the monks. On either side, bearded and robed in black, they stand in a group around an upright reading-desk upon which the books of the liturgy are laid. Their chant is sonorous, the underlying drone of the *ison* forming a foundation for the melody, the undulating chant of worship and prayer, which passes from one side to the other. Some monks stand or half sit in the stalls that surround each apse, whilst others appear to walk in and out in no particular order. Behind the iconostasis, in the sanctuary, the priests perform their holy tasks, coming out through curtained doors from time to time to read from the scriptures or spread the aroma of incense upon us all.

Eventually, monks and lay people alike form a procession to venerate the icons, crossing themselves from forehead to belly and from right to left. Many monks also perform modest prostrations, the younger with more vigour than the older, east, west, south and north. And then, for the communion or *koinonia*, the priest, using a long spoon, takes from the chalice small pieces of bread dipped in wine and places them into the

upturned mouths of the faithful. The service that has built to a climax now recedes and laymen and monks walk out into the sunlit courtyard.

As a birthright Quaker, brought up in the plainness and simplicity of our meeting for worship, you might suppose that this would all be something of a shock, even intense discomfort. Indeed, I was quite prepared to feel oppressed. But actually I felt strangely at home.

In my local meeting, we might allow ourselves a vase of flowers, taken from the garden of one Friend or another, but otherwise we limit ourselves to a circle of chairs and a table upon which are placed a few books, the Bible, our Advices and Queries and a copy of Quaker Faith and Practice. We sit in silence, with no priests and certainly no chanting. From time to time, a member of the meeting may stand to offer a prayer or share a thought but, often, there will be nothing more than a deep and shared silence. This is our way.

But behind a superficial difference, there is truly much in common. For in the orthodox service, I have found myself to be very much at one with God. The liturgy is being performed before me but, as in a Quaker meeting for worship, its effect is to draw me into a state of stillness and prayer that prepares me to wait upon the Lord with an open and humble heart. The chanting and incense, the icons and candles may be mesmeric but, for the orthodox monks and lay people, the ritual, the chant and the icons have no meaning other than as a direct expression of the Divine. When the icons are venerated, it is the Divine presence that is worshipped and not the icons themselves.

Furthermore, the silence of Quakerism is matched by the silent prayer of the Orthodox hesychasts, solitary monks that live a life of austerity and silence, inwardly repeating over and over again the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me”. These solitary and often elderly monks can sometimes be seen sitting quietly in a corner during the Divine Liturgy, perhaps waiting to be inwardly ‘refreshed’ by the bread and wine of the *koinonia*. Indeed, some will say that the drone of the chant represents the ever-recurring sound of the Jesus Prayer and that a life of inner prayer requires that there is also, albeit elsewhere, the outer performance of the Divine Liturgy.

In any event, for both Quakers and Orthodox, we seek to awaken that of God in our hearts so that we can better act aright in our daily lives, finding God’s will and expressing love and compassion in all things. In

taking communion, the Orthodox 'receive' that which is an expression of the Divine in order that they may turn their hearts to the Lord. For Quakers, the Divine is ever-present but has to be awakened in the silence of worship. For both, there must be both prayer and a willingness to turn to God.

We do not, therefore, meet as strangers but as brothers and sisters. As Quakers, we propose that there is that of God in everyone. And that, surely, is what is being celebrated in the Orthodox liturgy. We in silent waiting. They in the veneration of the icons and in the taking of the bread and wine. Inwardly or outwardly, each one of us seeks to find that of God within ourselves.

David Cadman, 2005

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