

Homily at the Sunday of Orthodoxy Pan-Orthodox Vespers, 2009

by Bishop Peter of Cleveland
St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!

Today we celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy – our priceless pearl.

Unfortunately, for many Orthodox Christians, knowledge of their faith is limited to what they learned in Sunday School. This is especially true when it comes to the Holy Scripture. Do not get me wrong, our devoted teachers in church schools do a tremendous job. What I am referring to, is the standard of knowledge. In church schools we have no choice but to bring down the level of Biblical stories to what a child can comprehend. But what about after Sunday School?

Yes, we have our seminaries, correspondence courses are available, lectures and seminars are offered, and the like. But is there anything closer to home?

Living in San Francisco, my parents, as most Russian emigres, closely followed everything that developed in the Soviet Union, and I was privy to what was discussed at home. I remember that I was always intrigued by the faith of my brothers and sisters, living in an atheistic state. The people there had no church schools, religious literature was almost impossible to obtain, and yet Orthodoxy, not only was alive, but people knew their faith. Yes, there were the 'babouski', but that could not have been enough. So, what was the source of this knowledge?

It was only at Holy Trinity Seminary, when our rector, the late Archbishop Averky, once stated in class that our divine services contain everything we need to know about Orthodoxy, that I understood what “school” – so to speak – the faithful in the Soviet Union attended.

In communist Russia many churches were closed or destroyed, but in those few that remained, divine services were performed zealously and diligently, often for hours. These services – were the schools. And they remain so today. They truly are schools of piety, schools of true Orthodoxy theology.

Another of my instructors, Metropolitan Laurus, wrote that our services tell us the entire history of our salvation, taken both from the Old and New Testaments. The fore-fathers, the great leaders of the chosen people, the prophets, events of the New Testament from the Nativity of St. John the Baptist to our Lord's Ascension, all come alive and pass before us in our minds.

And how much is opened to us in the hymns and canons. Everything is there – dogmatic theology, moral theology, comparative theology, patristics; the history of the Holy Church; the lives of the saints.

And finally, the liturgical texts, especially in the Lenten Triodion, tell us about man's fate, the last days, the end of this world, and the second coming of Christ. A classic in the respect is the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete.

Different parts of our divine services were compiled gradually, over the course of centuries, by great teachers, spiritual poets, and angel-like ascetics.

The great Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (XIV, 40). Consequently, definite guidelines were developed in order to organize this vast material into a harmonious system.

These rules are known as the Typicon, or in Slavonic – Уставъ. The first such collection dates back to the VI century, and comes to us from the monastery of St. Savva the Sanctified, near Jerusalem. This is the Jerusalem Typikon used by the Russian, and the other Slavic Churches. The second collection dates to the IX century and was compiled by the monks of the Studion monastery in Constantinople. These are the rubrics used by most of the Greek language Churches.

We all are concerned how best to preserve our precious Orthodox faith, being surrounded by an ever more secularized world, and pass it on to the next generation. What better way then through our divine services, performing them in the way they were written and the way they were meant to be served.

Yes, living in America we sometimes must make sacrifices and adapt to the world around us, but let us be careful, and in doing so, not go too far and become, as another of my teachers said, 'Protestants of the Eastern Rite.'

Amen.

+Peter, Bishop of Cleveland

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