

On the Vanity of the World and the Importance of Attending the Divine Services of the Church

At the very heart of our faith, as Orthodox Christians, should be the belief and conviction that the world in which we live is temporal, finite, and, as the Apostle and Theologian John says, passing away (I John 2:17). Moreover, we believe that the world, as portrayed throughout Holy Scripture and in the writings of the Holy Fathers, is that which is in direct opposition to God and under the sway of the Evil One (I John 5:19). It follows that all who love the world implicitly despise our Lord and thus make themselves His enemies (James 4:4). Furthermore, the world, since it is under the sway of the Evil One, is incapable of offering us any form of true joy. What satisfaction that it may seem to offer is fleeting and quickly turns to ash. St. Ephraim the Syrian confirms this: *No advantages do you offer those who love you, O world, you dwelling place of sorrows* (Spiritual Psalter). The term ‘world’, as we are using it, and as it is often used in Scripture and in the writings of the Fathers, does not refer to the physical world which we inhabit, but rather to the sin and disfigurement that exists within the world as a consequence of the Fall. Thus, as Orthodox Christians, our primary aspiration should be to reject this world of sin, decay, and nothingness, and to embrace Christ, Who is the Author of our salvation, the True Joy-giver, and the One Who stands between us and the Abyss. We should aspire daily to conform ourselves to His Divine Likeness by the keeping of His Holy Commandments and by the reception of His Holy Mysteries, as mediated to us by His Church. In this way, the Lord enables us to become *partakers of [His] Divine Nature* (II Peter 1:4), and so, by His mercy, enables our salvation.

Part and parcel of our salvation is our obedience and commitment to the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church, as Christ’s very Body, stands in direct opposition to the world. If the world is the receptacle of all sin, vanity, and nothingness, the Orthodox Church is, inversely, the Vessel from which man derives sanctification, meaning, and divine grace. Thus, the Orthodox Church, as the source and summit of all grace and truth on earth, mediates to us what we need for our salvation. St. Cyprian of Carthage, confirming this notion and recognizing that salvation is impossible apart from the Orthodox Church, writes: *He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother* (Treatise I).

It is important to understand that each individual Orthodox parish, as a microcosm of the Orthodox Church as a whole, is the place where the Holy Trinity metes out salvation to us on a weekly basis. It is here, in the divine services of the Church, where we witness the commingling of heaven and earth—we stand with the Most Holy Theotokos, the Holy Angels, and the Saints of all ages past, and with them we offer up prayers and supplications to the King of all. It is here where we mystically encounter Christ Himself in the Flesh in the form of the Eucharist and where His other Holy Mysteries sanctify us. Indeed, every time the doors of our parish are opened, the Lord is there, ready to manifest Himself to those who seek Him.

If we truly believe the content written above—that the world contains no joy, that the Orthodox Church is the Body of Christ, and that our parish manifest the Lord’s divine grace on earth—how is it that we keep ourselves from our parish and from the divine services which the Lord offers us? If we really believe that the Lord himself is mystically present in our parish, how can we keep ourselves away? How can we deem any divine service, whether it be a Moleben, Vespers, Matins, the Divine Liturgy, or otherwise, unworthy of our time? How can we ever be too busy or live too far away to refuse an encounter with the Lord, *in Whom we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28)? If the Lord is the very center of our lives, as He should be, how can we deny Him? If we refuse to stand before Him during the divine services and reject His grace, can we really expect Him to stand us at His right hand together with all His elect following the Dread Judgment?

Of course, it is likely that there are days when we simply do not feel like attending the divine services. Perhaps we are tired, or work was especially difficult, or perhaps we feel like we simply need a break. We must remember that often our physical and emotional feelings can and do lead us into sin and spiritual harm. Consequently, our feelings must be ignored when they are inclined to lead us away from what we know is right, even when our ignoring of them may inconvenience us or make us uncomfortable. Let us recall the words of St. Theophan the Recluse: *Throw out of your head the idea that you can, through a comfortable life, become what you must be in Christ* (Three Homilies on the Bearing of the Cross). We, as Orthodox Christians, must do what is difficult for the sake of Christ and for the sake of our salvation. We must, in the words of St. Paul, *crucify the flesh* (Galatians 5:24)—we must crucify our own will and subordinate it to our Lord and Master’s divine will. Let us bear in mind that it is *always* our Lord’s will that we come stand before Him in the divine services, and let us note that our attendance contributes to our salvation. Remembering the above, let us resolve to become steadfast in our attendance of the divine services. For, when we attend, not only are we sanctified, but we express our rejection of this world and our commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ and to His Church.