Communion with the Prince of Peace

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Basil the Great's Canon 13 advised soldiers who had killed in war to refrain from receiving communion for three years. His linking the question of war with the Eucharist may seem surprising: after all, the Eucharist is often viewed through the lens of sacramental theology as a liturgical practice. Though obviously an act of the Church, it is often construed in individualistic spiritual terms, in which greater focus is placed on the appropriateness of a particular person's reception of Communion than on the social implications of the liturgical celebration. By contrast, the legitimacy of Christian participation in war is normally perceived as a topic for social or political ethics.

Nevertheless, to view them as entirely separate topics is to fall well short of the fullness of an Orthodox vision of both the profundity of the Eucharist and the tragedy of war. Those who approach the chalice commune mystically with Jesus Christ in the reign of heavenly peace. Shedding the blood of those who bear his image and likeness poses grave threats to communion with the Lord. To place the spiritual gravity of warfare within the context of the Eucharist reflects the intrinsic connection between communion with God and with all human persons. The key question for Orthodoxy is thus not by what standards a war may be "just," but how those spiritually and morally shattered by violence may know Christ's healing and strength.

Not merely an act of personal piety performed in a religious service, the celebration of the Divine Liturgy manifests the Church's entrance into the heavenly banquet, in which Isaiah's vision is fulfilled: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:4). To receive the body and blood of Christ is to commune with a Messiah who rejected theocratic militarism and responded with nonviolent love and forgiveness even to the soldiers who executed him. The shedding of blood has been a paradigmatic sign of the corruption of humans' relationship with God and with one another since Cain murdered Abel. By entering into death through his self-offering on the cross, Jesus Christ took upon himself the consequences of this characteristic distortion of humanity. To receive his body and blood is to participate mystically in an eschatological reign in which the very causes of violence are healed. Celebration of the Divine Liturgy is a prophetic act that invites the world to enter into heavenly peace. The contrast between bloodshed and eucharistic celebration reveals the profound brokenness of the world of war, especially for those touched personally by deliberate, organized slaughter. As Tamara Grdzelidze notes, "Peace lies at the heart of the

Eucharistic bond and is intrinsic to the love that the bloodless sacrifice fulfills. . . . [W]ar and conflict are alien to the eucharistic celebration."[1]

In this light, Fr. John McGuckin affirms the abiding relevance of Basil's thirteenth Canon. Though the period of exclusion was far shorter than that required for murderers, a season of excommunication provided those traumatized by the shedding of blood an opportunity to find healing for their souls so that they would be prepared to approach the chalice with a clear conscience. The canon reflects that taking life under any circumstances falls short of the nonviolent, forgiving love of Jesus, with whom one communes in the Eucharist. It calls soldiers to confront the possibility that their actions have gravely wounded their relationship with Christ, putting them out of communion with him. If that broken relationship were not recognized and restored through repentance, they would risk receiving the Eucharist unworthily.[2]

Such repentance is not a matter of fulfilling legal obligations or satisfying a standard of justice. As with other disciplinary canons of the Church, Basil's canon is to be applied therapeutically for the healing of particular people.[3] Some who kill in war may have such spiritual clarity that they immediately embody the deep sorrow for their sins called for in the prayers said by communicants in preparation to receive

Saints Boris and Gleb. Icon, fourteenth century. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

[1] Tamara Grdzelidze, "The Orthodox Church in Situations of War and Conflict," in *Just Peace: Orthodox Perspectives*, ed. Semegnish Asfaw, Alexios Chehadeh, and Marian Gh. Simion (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012) 187–88.

[2] See Fr. John McGuckin, "Nonviolence and Peace Traditions in Early & Eastern Christianity," in *For the Peace from Above: An Orthodox Resource Book on War, Peace and Nationalism*, ed. Fr. Hildo Bos and Jim Forest (Rollinsford, NH.: Orthodox Research Institute, 2011), 434–40; Yuri Stoyanov, "Norms of War in Eastern Orthodox Christianity," in *World Religions and Norms of War,* ed. Vesselin Popovski, Gregory M. Reichberg, and Nicholas Turner (New York: United Nations University Press, 2009), 169–75.

the Eucharist. Others may need years of intensive struggle to regain the strength necessary to commune with spiritual integrity, due to inflamed passions, idolatrous national ideologies, or other maladies of soul. It is not uncommon, for example, to encounter veterans whose personalities remain shattered years, or even decades, after military service. On the other hand, some return to civilian life easily and become exemplars of virtues such as forgiveness and peacemaking. Some have been canonized as martyrs, passion-bearers, or governmental leaders who overcame the threats to the soul present in the military profession. The path to sacramental participation in the peaceable kingdom varies according to the challenges of each individual.[4]

The Divine Liturgy's petitions for both peace and the welfare of the armed forces reflect a similarly therapeutic orientation. From the opening exclamation, the eucharistic worship of the Church is oriented toward the peace of the heavenly kingdom. Petitions follow for "the peace from above and the salvation of our souls" and "the peace of the whole world, the good estate of the churches of God, and the union of all." Then those gathered pray for national leaders, the armed forces, and vulnerable populations such as travelers, captives, and the sick. Likewise, the anaphoras of Basil the Great and John Chrysostom include an appeal to God to "be mindful . . . of all civil authorities and our armed forces; grant them a secure and lasting peace . . . that we in their tranquility may a lead a calm and peaceful life in all reverence and godliness."[5]

The Liturgy calls congregants to offer every dimension of themselves, both individually and collectively, for healing and transformation in holiness. It presents an invitation to a eucharistic life in which nothing is held back from full communion with Christ, so that one's existence becomes radiant with the divine energies through personal union with him. But even as the Church enters mystically into the peaceable reign of the kingdom, the human beings who vocalize these prayers remain in a world that does not yet embody the fullness of heavenly peace. While the healing of the creation is not yet consummated, the Liturgy calls communicants, both personally and collectively, to live as icons of the fulfillment of God's gracious purposes.

Though falling short of embodying straightforwardly the nonviolent, forgiving love of Jesus, governmental authorities and armed forces seem practically necessary to sustain social orders that serve God's purposes for the collective life of humanity. In situations of chaos and anarchy, no social institution, including the Church, is able to function properly. Healthcare, education, family life, and economic structures that are necessary for human flourishing require stability and some level of social cohesion and justice. The broken and partial peace maintained by governments with military force serves God's intentions for sustaining social orders in which people may live together with relative harmony. These orders obviously vary tremendously in how—and how well—they accomplish those purposes. As history and current events bear out, the relationship between God's kingdom and earthly kingdoms is never unambiguous, uncomplicated, or uncompromised. Nonetheless, the well-being of human beings in the world as we know it seems dependent upon such structures. [6]

[3] See John H. Erickson, *The Challenge of Our Past: Studies in Orthodox Canon Law and Church History* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 31

[4] See Alexander Webster, T*he Pacifist Option: The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Lanham, MD.: International Scholars Publications, 1998), 183ff.

[5] See *For the Peace from Above,* 173–74; and Philip LeMasters, *The Goodness of God's Creation* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 2008), 70–72.

[6] "Called to be 'Craftsmen of Peace and Justice,'" Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Consultation towards the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, Leros, Greece, 2009; and Philip LeMasters, "A Dynamic Praxis of Peace: Orthodox Social Ethics and Just Peacemaking," *Revista Teoligică 4* (2010): 69–82.

In other words, nations, governments, and armies play a role in the healing of the world. The pursuit of peace is a dynamic and multifaceted process, and no part of it is irrelevant for the salvation of those who bear God's image and likeness. The heavenly kingdom is the fulfillment of all things in peace. The Liturgy's prayers for military forces are for God to accomplish his purposes through them for the benefit of all. There remains a critical distance between the Eucharist and warfare, as shown in the petition for God to give the military "a secure and lasting peace." This is not a prayer for war but for its absence. That appeals for God to care for the weak and suffering follow closely is no surprise, as societies embroiled in war typically have little time or energy to care for the needy. Far from an uncritical endorsement of any war or political order, these petitions have the prophetic thrust of calling those with power to exercise it only in accord with the fulfillment of God's intentions. By implication, they identify the use of armed force for anything other than a legitimate peace that blesses all concerned as being ungodly. Prayed during the anaphora, these petitions provide a vision of what it looks like when nations and armies are offered to God in a world that has not yet entered into the fullness of heavenly peace: they become instruments for a social harmony that enables human flourishing, blesses the weak, and facilitates the ministries of the Church.

Even while recognizing the terrible evils associated with abuses of military force and the profound spiritual and moral damage that often arises from killing in war, Orthodoxy affirms that soldiers may find the healing of their souls and grow in holiness. Their shedding of blood may be an "involuntary sin" that they could not avoid in doing the best they could, under inevitably less than ideal circumstances, to protect the innocent and to defend their nation against unjust attack. Even in such cases, participation in battle often presents soldiers with great challenges, to avoid being overcome by hatred, bloodlust, and dehumanization of the enemy. Rape, domestic violence, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, and suicide are all too common occurrences when human beings "cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war."[7]

Soldiers encounter profound temptations to compromise the health of their relationships with God and with their neighbors. Those personally involved in such broken circumstances require pastoral guidance to help them avoid and recover from grave spiritual, moral, psychological, and social trauma. The Church's response is not juridical, in the sense of applying abstract principles to particular cases, but instead focuses on helping people grow in communion with Christ. While Orthodoxy has not officially endorsed any version of the Just War theory, various standards concerning when, how, and by whom war is legitimately waged have been employed by clergy, scholars, and governmental and military leaders throughout the history of the Church.[8] Moral standards for when and how nations wage war may help political and military leaders, as well as average soldiers, do better rather than worse in regulating their use of deadly force. They may provide a common moral language for citizens to employ in naming actions and policies that fall short of a government's professed ideals. Nevertheless, regardless of such standards, warfare remains a distortion of the peace and reconciliation that God intends for human beings and communities. Even if

[7] See McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 402.

[8] See Stoyanov, 166–219; and Marian Gh. Simeon, "Seven Factors of Ambivalence in Defining a Just War Theory in Eastern Christianity," in *Proceedings: The 32nd Annual Congress of the American Romanian Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Montreal: Polytechnic International Press, 2008).

soldiers follow the relevant moral and professional codes in battle, shedding the blood of those who bear God's image and likeness threatens the health of the soul. To receive the Eucharist is to dine at a banquet of heavenly peace; in contrast, to kill is to enact a paradigmatic sign of humanity's estrangement from paradise.

In the petitions before the Lord's Prayer in the Divine Liturgy, the Church prays that "the whole day may be perfect, holy, peaceful, and sinless" and "that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance." These prayers, said in preparation for sacramental communion with the Prince of Peace, indicate that such a life is most fitting for those who enter mystically into the heavenly banquet. These blessings reflect God's purposes for human beings in this world. They describe the communicants' vocation to become living icons of heavenly peace. As Mother Maria Skobtsova wrote, the Eucharist entails a "universal liturgy [in which] we must offer our hearts, like bread and wine, in order that they may be transformed into Christ's love."[9]

In contrast, anyone who thinks that a day of bloodshed and terror is "perfect, holy, peaceful, and sinless" is spiritually and morally blind. The horrors of war contradict the calling to blessedness, for they manifest the brokenness of human souls and relationships; indeed, they threaten to make such brokenness worse. They point humanity on a trajectory away from the nourishment provided for holiness that is the Eucharist. This threat may well be present even when waging war to protect the innocent or defend one's homeland from unjust invasion becomes tragically necessary as the best that one can do under the circumstances. Those who follow strictly the standards of Just War theory, both for going to war and for conducting it, may still bear the debilitating spiritual, moral, and psychological wounds that so often occur when people organize themselves to kill one another in a systematic way. And even what are thought of as the most just wars inevitably fall short of their espoused moral virtues in ways that often trouble the consciences of those involved for the rest of their lives. As an aging munitions worker from World War II wrote a few years ago, "I kept remembering the 300,000 old men and women and young pregnant mothers and children wild-eyed with fear who were killed when we firebombed Tokyo, and then there was what we did at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And I loaded the fuses for those bombs and have lain awake at night wondering if there is forgiveness."[10]

To be sure, the intentional bombing of civilian population centers falls well short of the kind of ethical discrimination associated with Just War theory. Nonetheless, even the most scrupulous adherence to such standards fails to remove the grave threat of harm to the soul invited by killing human beings. The Eucharist nourishes communicants for personal participation in the life of God by grace; it calls them to "lay aside all earthly cares" that impede mystical entrance into the banquet of heavenly peace. Moral and legal codes, in contrast, seek to direct and limit the forces of death in ways that serve the imperfect justice that is possible in a world of corruption. War, when viewed in the context of the Eucharist, manifests how humanity has not yet embraced the fullness of its healing. The spiritual dangers of warfare are not resolved by attempts to provide theoretical justification for

[9] Maria Skobstova, *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 2003), 185.

[10] Henry A. Buchanan, letter to the editor, *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 15, 2010, 5C. See LeMasters, "Orthodox Perspectives on Peace, Violence and War," *The Ecumenical Review* 63.1 (March 2011): 54–61.

the morality of war. No matter how just or moral the shedding of blood may be according to philosophical or legal formulations, it risks a deep break in communion with the Lord and one's neighbors. Nonetheless, those with blood on their hands may still finding healing for their souls.

That the Orthodox Church has canonized many former soldiers as exemplars of holiness is a sign of hope that those traumatized by the ravages of war may find healing from all the corrupting influences of participation in military campaigns. For example, the great martyrs George and Theodore the Recruit were highly successful military commanders who bravely refused to obey commands to worship the pagan gods of Rome. They endured torture and death in making the ultimate witness for the heavenly peace of God's kingdom. They are not recognized as saints because of their military service, but because their faithfulness to Christ was displayed by following his example in doing the opposite of what military virtue normally demanded. They disobeyed the orders of their earthly superiors and refused to defend themselves. Instead of shedding the blood of others, they offered their own blood to be shed. The same is true of the English King Edmund, the Serbian John Vladimir, and the passionbearers Boris and Gleb of Kiev, all of whom accepted death in a Christ-like fashion out of love.[11]

Their example demonstrates that those who have shed blood in war, even those who have had successful careers as military commanders, may still shine radiantly with holiness through personal union with Christ. His great self-offering is made present sacramentally in the celebration of the Eucharist: "Your own of your own, we offer unto you on behalf of all and for all." Certainly, physical martyrdom is not required for all warriors to grow in holiness. There are many other paths by which people may offer themselves to God and find healing of the corruptions that beset their souls. As Paul taught, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). To kill the corruption of one's soul requires personal union with Christ in his self-offering, for it is through him that human beings find the fulfillment of our ancient vocation to become like God in holiness. The victory of the God-Man over death enables human beings to become participants by grace in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity. Crucifying one's passions is an extension of baptism into the death of Christ, into his healing of the corruption of the human person caused by sin. Such an ongoing death to the deleterious effects of sin is necessary in order to share in the healing and fulfillment of humanity brought by Christ's resurrection. "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

As should all other Orthodox Christians, those who have shed blood must find healing for the disordered and misdirected desires that are the passions. Even as exposing one's illness to a physician requires a kind of self-discipline, soldiers will pursue an ascetical struggle to accept therapy that restores them to spiritual health. Even as physicians prescribe different treatments for particular patients, spiritual fathers and mothers will guide them to greater strength by employing familiar therapies such as confession, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and spiritual reading. Especially when the soldier's brokenness has

[11] See Webster, *The Pacifist Option*, 184-195; Bos and Forest, eds., *For the Peace from Above*, 143–149, 175-191.

contributed to strained family and other relationships, they may suggest appropriate efforts to heal those dynamics. Furthermore, they may refer those suffering from psychological disorders, such as PTSD or drug addiction, to clinicians who are professionally competent to address such issues. Jean-Claude Larchet recognizes that recourse to such therapists is nothing new, as "the Fathers were quick to recognize that some forms of mental illness had organic causes. For these they recommended such appropriate medical therapy as was available in their days."[12]

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the journey of repentance is a positive process of offering oneself to God for fulfillment in the divine likeness. By embracing such therapies for their healing, those traumatized by the shedding of blood die to the corrupting effects of sin and enter more fully into the peaceable reign made present sacramentally in the Divine Liturgy. The Church's pastoral care for soldiers should focus on how to bring those shattered by participation in the paradigmatic sign of human corruption into intimate personal union with the Prince of Peace. Its therapies should help them gain the spiritual clarity to see the severe tension between warfare and the irenic blessedness to which they are called.

Their reception of communion will manifest that they have found the healing necessary to join in the heavenly banquet of the Messiah who rejected militarism to the point of accepting death at the hands of Roman soldiers. That soldiers may enter into the peaceable reign, and even become canonized as saints, demonstrates that Christ's merciful healing extends to all with the spiritual clarity to approach him "with the fear of God and faith and love." The Church's response to those wounded by the ravages of war displays the integration of the liturgical and the therapeutic in the healing of souls and the salvation of the world. ❋

[12] Jean-Claude Larchet, *Mental Disorders and Spiritual Healing: Teachings from the Early Christian East* (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2005), 8.

Opposite Page: The Apostles receiving the Eucharist. Fresco at Church of Saint Nicholas Orphanos, Thessaloniki, fourteenth century.

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